

# Scales of identity in the literature of African independences: an exploratory approach to nationalism, social identities, and cultural production

Fábio Baqueiro Figueiredo[1]

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**Abstract:** This paper questions how African writers in the age of independences referred in their texts to social identities fashioned upon nation, race, ethnicity and class, in order to define, explain and influence collective action in the frame of particular nation-building projects. After reviewing the possibility of talking of a ‘literature of African independences,’ it is sought to establish the convenience of a ‘bottom-up’ approach to the social classifications involved, understanding them as marks on a scale of identities, rather than discrete conceptual fields. Emphasized here is their ‘practical use’ as a privileged analytical index for the broader universe of African nationalism and its internal struggles. Finally, a small comparative sketch of the divergent possibilities of writing about identities on different scales is presented, drawing upon an illustrative *corpus* of African writers.

**Keywords:** African literatures; social classifications; nationalism.

**Resumo:** Este artigo busca investigar de que maneira escritores africanos da época das independências recorriam, em seus textos, a identidades sociais demarcadas em termos de nação, raça, etnia e classe, no esforço de definir, explicar e pautar a ação coletiva pelo quadro de projetos políticos nacionais específicos. Após revisar a possibilidade de se falar de uma “literatura africana das independências”, busca-se definir a conveniência de uma abordagem “de baixo para cima” das classificações sociais envolvidas, entendendo-as como pontos em uma escala de identidades, mais que como campos conceituais discretos, e enfatizando seu “uso prático” como um índice analítico privilegiado para o universo mais amplo do nacionalismo africano e suas disputas. Finalmente, apresenta-se um pequeno esboço comparativo das possibilidades de tratamento divergente da identidade em diferentes escalas a partir de um *corpus* ilustrativo de autores africanos.

**Palavras-chave:** literaturas africanas; classificações sociais; nacionalismo.

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[1] Institute of Humanities and Letters (Malês Campus), Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-brasileira (Unilab), São Francisco do Conde (BA), Brazil. *E-mail:* fabiobaq@unilab.edu.br

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In its title, this article uses two formulations which are not very usual in debates about African literature, whether in the field of history or of literary studies. I will thus start by trying to explain what I mean by ‘scales of identity’ and ‘the literature of African independences.’

In the various efforts to establish a periodization of African literature undertaken in recent decades, there is a consensus that the ‘classic’ periodization schemes, in other words those originally proposed for European literature, are not applicable to the African space – unlike in Brazil, where, until a national literature had been formed, a process of successive importations were assumed, more or less adapted from European literary movements. Another tacit consensus is the assumption that the principal (and sometimes only) historical aspect to determine the thematic and stylistic transformation of literature produced in Africa, and as a result its various phases, was European colonial domination.

Generally speaking, it is acknowledged that there exists a colonial literature about Africa written by Europeans or settlers, in which the exoticization of African peoples and landscapes constituted the backdrop for Promethean adventures, while white protagonists persevered against an extensive range of adversities to achieve a greater moral objective, often involving saving Africans from themselves and their supposed barbarity, justifying *en passant* the need for the colonial rule. This phase, which corresponds historically to a silence imposed on Africans by the theft of their political sovereignty represented by European domination, would be followed by an anticolonial literature, now written by Africans and characterized by the reiterated denunciation of colonialism, focusing especially on the acute contradiction between its metropolitan representation as a disinterested civilizing effort and the empirical brutality of the exploitation of the African labor force and natural resources to the advantage of the Europeans. Another characteristic was a strong nativist impulse, oriented towards the celebration of African realities from the past and their recovery as alternatives for social and civilizing values to counterpoise the unscrupulous and cynical predation which summarized the European contribution to the development of the continent. This phase corresponded to a ‘retaking of the initiative,’ with the progressive awareness on the part of Africans of the need to recover the political control of their own history, coinciding with the emergence of modern nationalism, initially as an intellectual movement, but shortly afterwards reconverted into a mass movement which would lead to the political or military conflicts that resulted in emancipation (e.g., Chaves, 1999; Bittencourt, 1999, 2010; Hamilton, 1984; Venâncio, 1992).

In relation to what came afterwards, there are controversies. In the manuals, the notion predominates that literature written after the obtaining of independence needs to be classified as ‘post-colonial,’ conferring on the term a primary meaning that was fundamentally chronological (Boehmer, 2005; Riesz, 2007). Other authors reserve the term for a meaning with a thematic orientation, locating it at a later moment, in which writers, a little all over

the continent, were abandoning the euphoria of independence and beginning to critically portray the political regimes and the societies of new countries leaving European domination (Appiah, 1997; Mata, 2003, 2007). Also within this field and advancing from literature to intellectual production as a whole, some seem to understand 'post-colonial' as the peripheral counterpart to 'post-modern,' highlighting their intimate theoretical relationship and their homologies as attempts to overcome modernity or its critical appropriation (Young, 1990; Ahluwalia, 2001). In turn, some authors demonstrate reticence about the label, some admitting its convenience, but cautioning against what they believe to be its limits (Irele, 2001), others preferring other characterisations, such as the recovery of 'neocolonial' proposed by Nkrumah in the 1960s (Henriques, 2014) or the more recent adhesion to 'decolonial.' (Ndllovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

As in all macro-explanatory frameworks, there are numerous problems which can be pointed to in these periodization efforts. In first place, in diverse parts of Africa there were autochthone literary traditions much before the arrival of Europeans, not to mention numerous genres of oral fiction narratives, widely disseminated all over the continent (Munro-Hay, 2001; Mafundikwa, 2006; Finnegan, 2014). The *ad hoc* solution of boxing all these disparate contributions, separated by various centuries, under the label of 'pre-colonial literature' only helps to unveil the Eurocentric bias built into the scheme. In second place, and linked with the previous point, there is the question of the language in which African literature is produced. The standard narrative takes for granted the use of colonial language as a literary vehicle – at most, the process of 'appropriation' by the language of the colonizer and its transformation into a cultural weapon to be mobilized against domination is adopted as a theme (e.g., Leite, 2004), in a form parallel to the notion, underlying a large part of the historiography, of the appropriation of the ideas of contemporary European political philosophy, especially the nation and the rational-bureaucratic state, by African nationalism (Mata, 2006; Prah, 2008; Sow and Abdulaziz, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

The problem of literary language in Africa is intimately related to the spatial framing in which this literature circulated. It is obvious that, despite the general concordance, the greater part of the periodizations are proposed for linguistic spaces which correspond to the old colonial empires. The very term 'post-colonial' emerged in Australia, in the context of English language literary criticisms, to cover production originating in all the corners of the extinct British empire, which established a critical and tense dialogue with the colonial inheritance (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 1989). This points to a dominant pattern of circulation, in which African literary production is not complete in the territories of new

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<sup>2</sup>Another interesting question, but which is tangential to the line of argumentation developed here, is linked to the definition of colonial literature and the *tropes* associated with it as a phase or period. Actually, colonial literature remained popular in the West throughout the twentieth century, having extended to the cinema since the beginning of sound films in the 1930s, and established itself there an extremely successful market niche, as demonstrated by the widespread circulation of recently works, such as *The Constant Gardener* or *The Last King of Scotland*.

countries leaving domination, but requires a validation through the critique of old powers (or their American substitutes, such as the United States or Brazil), where was also found a large part of its reading public. This ended up shaping a structural extraversion of African literature (Appiah, 1997; Irele, 2001; Moraes, 2010) – although, obviously, it cannot be reduced to this aspect of its merchandising. Also notable about is a further parallel between the field of literary criticism and political science, between the theses of the incompleteness of the implementation of a literary system and the nation state in these countries.<sup>3</sup>

Taking the colonial language as a primordial factor to determine the constitution of the *corpora* to be analyzed in theoretical terms implies obliterating at once the set of literary discourses which escaped the cultural circuit in which European colonization in Africa progressively developed during the twentieth century, reinforcing and validating the dialectic triad constituted by the terms ‘colonial,’ ‘anticolonial,’ and ‘post-colonial.’ At the same time, subsuming the literature produced in the African continent into a broader geographic space, whose shapes are determined by a history of common subordination to a given European power, entails a certain dilution of the African condition of these discourses and their contexts of enunciation, circulation, and reception. In this sense, it’s worthwhile to indulge in a critical effort which seeks to escape from the linguistic and marketing framework imposed by the colonial inheritance (‘Anglophone,’ ‘Francophone,’ ‘Lusophone’) and which interrogates the African space in its completeness, in order to verify if and to what extent we are losing important analytical possibilities when we accept frontiers which were not necessarily respected by the actors involved in the cultural production process, in the exchanges of meaning which characterize the history of the African continent during the twentieth century.

It is true that the different ‘Europhonies’ create preferential spaces of circulation which are not homologous, but hierarchically deployed in relation to each other – with the expression in English being the one which permits the widest spectrum, and Portuguese the least. Also much more intense is the flow of literary products between the Francophone and Anglophone spheres, by means of translation, with the Lusophone world being relatively isolated from the widest marketing structure of African production. This disposition produces a series of effects on intellectual production in the various continental spaces, which cannot be discussed here. Nevertheless, it is necessary to highlight that this does not completely block crossed circulation, nor is it sufficient to constitute, around each colonial language, a completely autonomous space which subsumes the broader African framework.

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<sup>3</sup>These theoretical correspondences between literature and history are not fortuitous, nor are they strictly speaking European in their enunciative anchoring. They can be read in Mbembe’s critical framework (2001), for whom African modes of self-writing have been structured (and limited) by the connection of the canonic significance of three events: slavery, colonialism, and *apartheid*, which together impose a wide-ranging narrative centered on notions of alienation (and the division of *self*), material expropriation, and historical degradation (loss of autonomy).

These considerations intend to take into account the 'African' in the 'literature of African Independences,' but what is also lacking is indicating to what extent I think a multiplicity of literary efforts can be grouped in an autonomous set, and why I believe that 'independences' is the best term to define this. As can be assumed, I am approximating myself to those authors who reserve the term post-colonial, in the African context, for a moment of a critical turn in relation to political regimes and societies constructed in the first two decades of self-government, whose precise chronology varies in accordance with the various countries and regions of the continent. The first – extemporaneous – signs of this movement emerged at the end of the 1960s, but it was at the end of the 1980s when they could be decidedly perceived as a collective process which would soon become dominant in the set of literary production (Appiah, 1997).

From this point of view, the 'post' of post-colonial represents an impulse for overcoming a previously hegemonic symbolic construction about empirical reality and the historic possibilities of recently independent African countries. This confers on literature produced in Africa during previous decades a group orientation, in other words, it implies that the 'literature of African independences,' as I propose to call it, cannot be used only as a term of convenience to designate a period of transition between 'anticolonial literature' and 'post-colonial literature,' nor as a fundamentally chronological label – actually it matters less that certain works were written before the date of political emancipation, and more their enrooting in the political and intellectual context of African independences, as understood collectively. I want to defend that there was actually a type of spectrum of thematic concerns, of formal experiments, but also efforts at institutionalization, which taken together present a strong unity, spreading throughout the continental space, although at diversified times and rhythms.

Without a doubt there is a certain continuity in the literature of independences in relation to what is usually called the 'anticolonial period,' in the settling of accounts with the meaning of social and cultural structures imposed by colonization. Similarly, to a large extent, it anticipates identity concerns, dissatisfaction with the new regimes, and the social criticism which later would be brought to the center of the debate. However, this production stands out by proposing a multifaceted exercise of the imagination of past or future African societies in the institutional framework of the constitution of literary traditions which can, in each case, be recognized as national. In other words, there is in this literature a strong dominance of nationalism, both in its general framework and in terms of specific national projects.

With these observations, I do not intend to state that African literary production of independences is homogenous or of fundamental concordance. To the contrary: even though it is strongly anchored in the nationalist project, it was one of the most instigating spaces of public debate in the twentieth century. This is because the nationalism which this literature

was a full part of was far from being monolithic, being intersected by the principal global tensions then shaping our world, as well as by the particular modes in which the intersected social hierarchies which characterize our time were being mobilized, questioned, and transformed in various territories in their way to become autonomous political entities. Much was at play in the African independences and not just for Africans. Precisely for this reason, opening a space for the investigation of the African literature of independences can help expand the field of historical research about the relations between politics and culture in the contemporary world.

An investigation in these terms should take into account the existence of two large spheres within which, in various African countries, a little before and a little after the date of political independence, a national literature emerged – first, about the collective representations transmitted in literary works (such as the nature of a people or peoples, the meaning of their history, or perspectives of the future), and a second related to the legitimation process of their own nationalist pretensions, which circulated around the empirical existence of a national specificity in the literature produced in that place and at that moment. In this second sphere, it is necessary to consider the efforts at institutionalization, such as literary congresses, the publication of collections, the foundation of publishing houses, and national writers associations, etc. Both the construction of collective representations and the defense of a national specificity imply thematic and stylistic marks in the texts themselves; the utility of separating these two spheres for analytical purposes consists in the fact that it thus becomes easier to identify what I am calling ‘scales of identity.’

I would like to ask the reader’s permission to make a digression now. First, I need to acknowledge that the analysis of relations between national construction and literary writing is no novelty. Since the middle of the 1980s, various studies have pointed to the intimate relationship between the constitution of a stable market of readers in a determined vernacular language and the practical effects of the collective imagination of a broad anonymous entity which has historically received the name ‘nation.’ This interpretative trajectory has conferred on the concept a progressive emphasis on its narrative aspect, contradicting the ‘classic’ understanding, which conceived the nation as a substantive entity (Anderson, 2008 [1985]; Bhabha, 1990; Chatterjee, 1995).

For the case of the literature of African independences, of particular relevance is the ongoing debate between Benedict Anderson and Partha Chatterjee about the relations between narratives of the nation, on the one hand, and state action in relation to the populations submitted to it, on the other. Also relevant is the conflict about the specific position anticolonial nationalisms should occupy in the theory. The forms assumed by the new ‘imaged community’ in each of the African colonial territories in search of political emancipation are based on projects which can be clearly identified in the spectrum of



political thought at the time. The novel can be read as the key genre of the imagination of the nation on the African continent, as much as in Europe. Similarly, the emergence and the (more or less disturbed) dissemination of local newspapers is clearly related to this moment of the construction of new collective identities. Finally, the importance for this literature and for nationalism in general of the participation of native civil servants in the colonial state and their circulation throughout the imperial territory is also clear (Anderson, 1998, 2008 [1985]). On the other hand, the structural contradiction inherent to the nationalist discourse in the colonial world can be identified without hesitation in Africa, in the form that modernization, being the principal foundation of the political philosophy on which European domination was based, also formed the basis for the nationalist discourses which sought to overcome it (Chatterjee, 1993, 1995).

Nevertheless, there are certain particularities in the literature of African independences which elude the explanations offered in the debate between these two authors, based on other empirical contexts, respectively eighteenth century Europe and India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the Africa of independences, the question of the scale of the 'imagined community' is imposed in an acute form as a problem. Although the 'nation' is almost always the privileged reference in formal political discussions, the same does not occur in literature, in which there can be observed the tendency for the nation to slip into an ethnic group, on the one hand, or into Africa (understood as the land of black men), on the other. In other words, the physical and social places constituted by the literature of independences are mediated not only by the narrative category of the nation, but also, alternatively or simultaneously, by two other categories: race and ethnicity. The pertinence of these two categories, which were exhaustively resorted to during the recent centuries of European knowledge of the African continent, is no surprise (Amselle and M'Bokolo, 2014 [1985]; Mudimbe, 2013 [1988]), although most analyses of national literature have, until now, elided more or less systematically the theoretical implications of the question.

In this article I propose to take nation, ethnicity, and race as correlated categories of description, explanation, and social action, whose mutual oppositions and possible interpenetrations are especially relevant for the study of recent African history. Moreover, I intend to observe how these interact with another category, one that intersects them in a tense form, being alternatively affirmed and denied: class. It is in this sense that I refer to 'scales' – instead of trying to define initially and in theoretical terms the content which supposedly should characterize race, or ethnicity, or nation, or class, I seek to understand these categories as points on an open spectrum of different options referring to identity and collective mobilization. In other words, it involves perceiving how these categories were symbolically mobilized by different actors, in the context of the same field of political disputes, and how they were continually redefined by this 'practical' and necessarily

polysemic use. When an author refers to ‘Africans,’ ‘Ibos,’ ‘Angolans,’ or ‘blacks,’ rarely are the social frontiers which regulate belonging to each of these entities constituted with an exclusive resort to a biological, cultural, political, or economic logic – in general, it involves more than this, and a little more. However, it makes a lot of difference to summon people to collective action referring to a given scale of identity, and not to another. In the sphere of the literature of the independences, the privileged option for any of these categories, chosen by specific authors to mediate the discourse about social change (or, in other words, the protagonism of history), can help understand the political projects in dispute during the decades of independences for the future of Africa, its nations, and its ethnic groups.

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Having defined the terms of my object, I propose now a rapid exploratory journey through the works of some African writers with the aim of producing a sketch of the convergences and divergences between the political projects and the scales of identity mobilized by these works, comparing their use, directly or indirectly, with the categories of nation, ethnicity, race, and class. In addition, I intend to observe how this problematic is linked to themes which, we can say, are more commonplace in the analyses of literature in the colonial world such as, for example, its relevance to particularism or universalism, to a privileged look to the past or the future, the decision to preserve or overcome infra-state loyalties and expectations about supra-national or continental collectivities, or even broader ones – in other words the tensions which Mbembe (2001) alternately attributed to two principal currents of contemporary African thought, which he respectively classified as nationalist and nativist.

The form of the article will allow this journey to be completed without a very rigid concern with the choice of the *corpus*, or at least this is hoped. Actually, I selected the works to be discussed more through an affective relationship constructed over the years than any systematic orientation. In this way, there is a clear predominance of authors who write in English, coming from countries relatively hegemonic in the concerto of contemporary African politics – certainly an effect of the dominant position of the Anglophone sphere in African intellectual production. All are men, in a reflection of the patent inequality of gender in operation in intellectual production and the editorial market of the period. Nor did I include any author who wrote in Portuguese. I chose this path for questions of space, but also emphasis, trusting that various of these authors will shadow the reading and offer comparative opportunities, since they are widely known to the specialized Brazilian public. Finally, it is necessary to say that this journey does not intend to present as much a demonstration of everything that has been said until the present as a mere suggestion of the existence and relevance of a given object and the feasibility of a determined focus.



Undoubtedly, a more balanced *corpus* in terms of the language of expression, national origin, and gender, as well as a more extensive treatment of each of the works, would result in a more vivid and better delineated panorama, but I believe that, even with these limitations, this text can make a contribution.

Before continuing, one last caution should be raised about the relationship between literature and nationalism in Africa. In Brazil and in Portugal, there is a tendency to overvalue the importance of literary production for the success of the nationalist project in the old Portuguese colonies on the continent. This tendency is, in part, the fruit of the widespread availability of literary works as an instrument for the study of social, cultural, and political processes of these countries in the contemporary epoch in comparison with other more fleeting research material. At the same time, it derives from a powerful construction of collective memory, with the active involvement of the writers themselves, which makes the appropriation of the colonial language and its change into a combat instrument as one of the fundamental aspects of the foundational myths of their respective countries.

The effective scope of written literature in colonial languages at the time of independences was, throughout the continent, very low – the number of Africans capable of reading in English, French, or Portuguese was irrisory in relation to the total population who needed to be mobilized for nationalist activities, both in cases of ‘negotiated’ independence and those of open warfare. There is no doubt that literature performed a much less outstanding role in popular mobilization and the dissemination of national feeling than, for example, radio programs, popular theater presentations, or music in African languages. Obviously, this does not lessen the importance of the analysis of the literature of the independences, but it demands that it is repositioned in the set of intellectual production and seen in a less triumphalist perspective, which in the end can expand our capacity to understand it in its complexity and to do justice to the creativity of its identarian constructions.

Having said this, we will start with a counterpoint – already proposed by Appiah (1997, Chp. 7) with another analytical purpose – between two of the best known and celebrated Nigerian writers, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. Although both deal with the relationship of African societies with colonial domination in a sophisticated form, looking at its profound meanings, and equally begin with ethnicity as a collective identification scale, the orientations which direct the development of their texts are divergent.

In the trilogy *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), and *Arrow of God* (1964), Achebe treats ethnicity as a particular human experience, but one that is fully significant and legitimate in itself: the Ibo culture, which the author himself comes from, is described as socially dynamic, with the disputes of power and the endogenous (but never idyllic)

forms of conflict resolution being emphasized.<sup>4</sup> For Achebe, the colonial past which has to be addressed is the place of an unequal conflict, in which Ibo attempts to adapt to and resist the imposition of domination and the penetration of a new religion and new social patterns are extremely malleable and sophisticated. However, ultimately these strategies are not capable of avoiding a really catastrophic colonial encounter for the local forms of social and political organization. While the colonial administrator is portrayed as someone fundamentally ignorant of what is really happening in the societies under his yoke, the hostage of simplistic and presumptuous interpretative schemes, the result of the domination remains an impasse against which African resistance crashes, and against which ethnic culture disintegrates and shatters, being forced to transform profoundly and to submit to the dictates of an exogenous order, in order not to be totally destroyed.

In the play *Death and the King's Horseman* (2003 [1976]), Soyinka shares with Achebe the portrait of the colonial administrator as an arrogant fool who does not have the minimum idea of what is really happening under his nose.<sup>5</sup> But the treatment of ethnicity goes in another direction: Soyinka is interested in universalizing Yoruba culture, from which he also comes, demonstrating its capacity to express, in a complex and meaningful manner, the human dramas of everywhere and which have always existed: fear of death, the coercion of tradition, the responsibilities of power, the inherent conflict in all human societies.

Soyinka's Yorubas coexist with Euripides' tyrants and Shakespeare's kings, and it is exactly through the irreducibility of ethnic belonging that their universality becomes stronger. The colonial encounter, as tragic as it was, is no more than a backdrop, an interlude in the historical development of an autonomous African civilization, which will continue. The marks of this domination are not perceived as having a nature which is particularly distinct from the marks left by other macro-historic events which had affected millenarian African societies, and the profound Yoruba values are irreducible even to the best university education on English soil. In effect, Soyinka exposes the path of 'acculturation' – perhaps the central problem for Achebe – in a merciless caricature: African soldiers at the service of the European administration, submissive and hostilized by the population, speak a heavily accented English, while the knight of the King of Oió and the women from the market express themselves, in a demonstration of aristocratic courtesy, through Yoruba proverbs and metaphors — in the most perfect English.

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<sup>4</sup>The first and the last of these novels have long since been translated into Portuguese. *Arrow of God* was published in Lisbon by *Edições 70*, in 1979, as *A flecha de Deus*. *Things Fall Apart* received the title *O mundo se despedaça*, in a 1983 edition by *Ática*. *No Longer at Ease* was only translated in 2013, as *A paz dura pouco*, by *Companhia das Letras* (who also released editions of *O mundo se despedaça* and *A flecha de Deus*, respectively in 2009 and 2011). In 2008, a Portuguese edition of *Things Fall Apart* was published, entitled *Quando tudo se desmorona*, by *Letras*. Other books by this author are available in Portuguese.

<sup>5</sup>The play reworks in English a plot that frequently appears in Nigerian popular theater in Yoruba (Soyinka, 2003 [1976]; Barber, 2003). As far as is known, this play has not been translated into Portuguese. The only translation of Soyinka that I know is *The Lion and the Jewel*, a play written and staged in 1959, translated by *Geração Editorial* in 2012 as *O leão e a joia*.

Here the very idea of tragedy, present in the description of the colonial encounter and strongly anchored in a tradition which comes from Athenian drama of the fifth century BCE and sixteenth century English theater, has to be related to the questioning of European ownership of Antiquity and its cultural legacies. However, it does not involve either a diopian path, in the sense of disputing the ultimate paternity of classical civilization, nor a relativist path in search for civilizing equivalence, following the example of the homologies constructed by Marcel Griaule in the 1930s between Dogon cosmogony and Greek and Sumerian mythologies. What Soyinka appears to postulate is closer to the thoughts of a W. E. B. du Bois or a Léopold Senghor about the existence of a specifically African contribution to the construction of a universal civilization. However, contrary to these authors, this contribution will not be anchored on race but on ethnicity.

Both Achebe and Soyinka start with the ethnic as a place for the linking of a collective identity through which a position is taken in relation to the significance of European domination and in function of which possible futures have to be considered for African societies. For both, the ethnic, as the place of culture and worldliness, whether it is taken in its specificity or its universality, is the primary place of collective identity and, as a result, the connection of any African discourse. The Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwey Armah strongly refuses the ethnic as a distraction and searches for a forgotten African unity, projected on the long distant past in *The Healers* (1979).<sup>6</sup>

As in Soyinka, the colonial encounter is not represented as particularly different in its nature from other largescale historical processes experienced by Africans. Although striking, the colonial yoke is nothing more than the culmination of a millenarian process of the successive migrations and divisions of a single black people (coming from an 'east' which could very well be Egypt) who lost the memory of their common origin and let themselves be dragged into fratricidal wars. As a counterpoint, Armah fictionally condenses the *corpus* of African knowledge (extremely fragmented, or described as such by the ethnographic production about the continent), in the form of an initiatory unitary tradition carefully hidden from European eyes, orally transmitted, linked to the knowledge of nature and the power of prediction of its phenomena, with a special emphasis on herbalism, but which was also the last bastion of an ancestral existential philosophy based on the refusal of power and manipulation. The many specific rituals observable and identifiable with ethnic cultures of the recent past, in turn, were no more than mere reminiscences, preserved forms of forgotten meanings, having lost their original collaborative orientation to increasingly assume a competitive disposition.

In a position we can call 'anarcho-Afrocentric,' Armah emphasizes the collaboration between African royalty and slavery, and very harshly points to the collaboration of the ruling slave-based aristocracies with the new colonial masters who installed themselves by

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<sup>6</sup>Despite having written various novels since 1968, and be part of an active African publishing circuit, there does not appear to have been a single translation of Ayi Kwey Armah into Portuguese.

force, but also through cooption and bribery. For him, the origin of the contemporary evils of the continent could not be attributed to external elements, but to an internal tendency of the development of African societies, stratification, and progressive differentiation, which had its origin in the political use of knowledge and the consequent restriction of its free circulation in the social fabric, and in the institution of court slavery, which had allowed an expansion of the domination capacity of states over African populations.

While this long process of fragmentation was the determinant factor in the incapacity of the African continent to resist the imposition of the colonial administration, on the other hand, it is the reality of this new situation which can permit, according to Armah, a recovery of the lost African unity, through the common experience of a new type of oppression and the weakening of the structures of the power of preexisting African states. The 'cure' was in the radical return to egalitarianism and in the settling of the accounts of Africans with their own long term political options. Curiously, however, it is the British colonial administrator (based on his prerogative of universal justice in crimes involving death) who assumes the role of *deus ex machina* to save the good and punish the bad, in the outcome of the plot.

Among the works analyzed, *The Healers* is certainly the one more directly related to the so called 'communitarian thesis' – a proposition that appeared in nationalist African political discourse between the 1950s and 1970s, according to which traditional societies on the continent were oriented towards a collectivist *ethos*, with individualism being an exogenous and recent interpolation. However, there are important disagreements between Armah and the nationalists who defended this thesis, such as Kaunda and Nyerere (and even Nkrumah, until he was overthrown by a coup d'état in 1966). For them, the 'traditional' collectivism of African societies implied the virtual absence of conflicts and social differentiation and particularly signified the non-existence of classes and the class struggle. Moreover, this communitarian representation was seen as valid for most contemporary rural African areas (in other words, for almost all of Africa), with the nationalism mission being precisely to prevent the emergence of a class based society, often through single party regimes which dealt very badly with political dissent. It would have been very hard for Armah to agree with this representation of 'traditional' Africa in the times of slavery and colonialism, moments he believed that were profoundly marked by the exercise of power by elites lacking any commitment to populations under their rule. However, there is still another important discrepancy: for the canonical formulation of the communitarian thesis, the place of the exercise of collectivism is precisely the ethnic group, or 'tribe,' as it was then called. For Armah, ethnicity is the result of this historic fragmentation of the black people, which diluted the original egalitarian and collective *ethos*; the place of the enunciation of discourses and the scale of the imagination of a viable collective future could only be race.

Race and ethnicity were not the only possibilities of convergence for projects of unity against repression. In *Remember Ruben* (1974), by the Cameroonian writer Mongo Beti, and in

*Petals of blood* (1978), by the Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o, no racial or ethnic unity is evoked.<sup>7</sup> As in Armah's novel, both the protagonists and their adversaries are black Africans, in neocolonial contexts, before and after political independence. In these two cases, however, the protagonism tends towards a collective, even though there were one or two individual characters around whom the narrative is woven. More importantly, ethnic origin and racial attribution do not serve to unite this group, much to the contrary; the environments in which the action takes place are multi-ethnic and at times pluri-racial – a shared class identity is resorted to in these works, which approximates them to the pioneering novel *Mine boy* (1946), by the South African writer Peter Abrahams, which examines the possibility of multi-racial trade unionism under the leadership of the black majority in a South Africa about to consolidate various legal measures of segregation in the *apartheid* system.<sup>8</sup>

Between *Mine Boy* and *Remember Ruben* or *Petals of Blood*, there is a difference of 30 years and a very discrepant historical context, but the fictional exercise of Peter Abrahams is unequivocally oriented to the search for a path to the emancipation of the majority of the country's population, with the self-government system granted by the British crown to the white minority in South Africa in 1921 being characterized by strikingly colonial traits. The novel proposes a series of identitarian dislocations across the frontiers which structured South African society in the middle of the twentieth century, in particular race and the urban-rural distinction, starting with the choice of a white protagonist, with an urban background, a worker in the mines which had sustained the economic growth of South Africa since the nineteenth century. His dilemma is whether to opt for a collective identification with the other workers, the immense majority black or with a rural origin, or with the foremen and managers, necessarily white. The path of trade unionism approximates *Mine Boy* to canonical European neo-realism, in a moment when there was very little African literary production in circulation with which to establish a denser internal dialogue. Nevertheless, Abrahams does not avoid presenting specific questions when he problematizes the need for white workers to submit to a black leadership as the only path to collective emancipation and the construction of a national identity 'from below.'

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<sup>7</sup>*Remember Ruben* was translated by José Saramago into Portuguese, keeping the original title in the 1983 edition published by Caminho. From the same author, Edições 70 published in 1979 *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba*, as *O pobre Cristo de Bomba*. *Petals of blood* was also published in 1979 by Edições 70 as *Pétalas de sangue*, in a very irregular translation. Editorial Caminho published in 1980 a translation of *Weep not Child*, from 1964, as *Não chores, menino*. The 1967 novel *A Grain of Wheat*, was recently published in Brazil (2015) as *Um grão de trigo* by Alfaguara. After 1980, Ngugi wa Thiong'o started to write in his native language, Kikuyu, but there is no translation of these works into Portuguese. The reasons for the linguistic change are precisely related to the attempt to revert the structural extroversion of African literature which was mentioned above. This followed an instigating debate with Chinua Achebe (Achebe, 1975; Thiong'o, 1986).

<sup>8</sup>*Mine boy* was published by Edições 70 as *O rapaz da mina* in 1980. As far as it is known, this is the only translation of Peter Abrahams to Portuguese. I must confess that initially I had doubts about including this novel in the analysis, due to the anteriority in relation to the other works cited. However, I decided to choose it as I consider 'independence' as a period longer and more complex than the simple operation of the transfer of sovereignty. It is no exaggeration to bear in mind that a year before the first edition of *Mine Boy*, the V Pan-African Congress was held in Manchester, which brought together a large number of intellectuals and politicians who would become, two decades later, the first sovereign rulers of their respective countries. Moreover, Abrahams's novel highlights the persistent relevance of class and its connections with race and other scales of identity – which I consider one of the constitutive aspects of the general context of the public African debate to which I intend to refer.

In *Petals of Blood*, in turn, African characters of Indian descent are presented in a positive manner, making visible a minority, but very significant one, part of the African population in Eastern and Southern Africa. Enrooted for centuries or decades, according to the distinct spaces, this part of the population is usually excluded from the canonical forms of the collective imagination, both in political discourses and in a more wide-ranging intellectual production, and from time to time served as a scapegoat during social tensions, being publicly hostilized and seen as opportunistic, exploitive, and parasitical due to their role in the popular retail trade in both the large cities and small interior villages.

For Thiong'o, belonging to the nation is not given by any right of birth, but through commitment to an emancipation project which is not exhausted by the formality of judicial statutes, pointing to the conquest of autonomy in its profound sense, the shared distribution and production of wealth and of life itself – and the character of Indian descent, who everyone is suspicious of, will in the end show themselves to be more worthy of being integrated to a collective belonging than the wealth black evangelical pastor, from whom everyone expects support and a welcome that will never come. To the contrary, this character epitomizes the contempt and the fear nurtured by the African *comprador* bourgeoisie with purchasing power in comparison to the overwhelming majority of the population – peasants and proletarianized – during colonial domination, seen as a threat to their accumulation efforts.

In *Petals of Blood*, the *locus* of identity is the small village in the interior of Kenya, which organizes to go to the capital to demand its share of the benefits of modernity promised during the struggle for liberation, but which is systematically excluded from the decisions about their own lives and about the land in which they live and work, to end up 'considered' for a development project in the form of a touristic venture aimed at the European market, which enriches the new administrators of the independent state and its private partners, at the cost of the proletarianization and ghettoization of the old residents. In *Remember Ruben*, the interior village maintains an intrinsic relationship with the gigantic shanty town in the capital, as a mirror but also as an extension, since both shape the spatial and temporal centers around which turn the trajectories of the principal characters. However, there is no romanticizing of the village – in both spaces, people are submitted to an illegitimate power, exercised by Africans, but imposed by the old colonial power, which chooses in accordance with its own directives both the 'traditional chiefs' and the 'modern' political leaders and parties which have to govern the independent country; in both there is also an insurgency about to explode, just below the adaptive layer of the daily life of expropriated and exhausting work, around which the characters construct their own schemes, based on cunning and interested collaboration.

However, to the contrary of Thiong'o, Beti sees in collective memory a means of escaping the neocolonial circus which neither consider equivalent to real independence. This is not the same memory evoked by Armah, of a millenarian past to whose existential principles



it is necessary to return, but rather a memory of exploitation which is linked in multiple temporalities, ranging from the secular imposture of the traditional chiefs to recent military repression of the liberation movement and the death in combat of its heroes, like the Ruben from the title. For Beti, it is the sharing of this memory, the struggle against dispossession, during the colonial regime and after, which confers the possibility of collective action and a perspective of a historical volte-face. In a curious manner, and in parallel to the resolution of the plot in *The Healers*, it is also with a *deus ex machina* that Beti reconciles the legitimacy of the pre-colonial tradition and the legitimacy of new times in the post-independence period in the figure of the proletarian hero of the town, finally recognized as the legitimate heir of the village chief, usurped in his infancy in an act of violence by a collaborator with French domination.

In the same way that the communitarian thesis directly impacts Ayi Kwei Armah's text, the debates about modernization, development, and dependency impact the texts of Mongo Beti and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. From the end of the 1960s a critical approach which emphasized the continuity of colonial economic relations in the post-independence contexts began to have an impact in the human sciences through contributions from all over the old colonial world, in particular Latin America and Africa, such as Walter Rodney, Samir Amin, Issa Shivji, Archie Mafeje, and various others.

This movement was contemporary to the emergence of the 'Third World' as a collective identity and as a point of connection in political action at the global level, much beyond the primarily descriptive content which modernization theorists had given to the term when they coined it in the 1950s. As these theoretical approaches were very influenced by Marxist thought, it could appear that the pushing aside of the categories of ethnicity and race as places of collective identification was an obvious and perhaps Eurocentric consequence. However, this does not appear to be the case for me, for two principal reasons. The first is that Marxist thought originating in the colonial world, since the initial production of C. L. R. James in the 1930s, was not reducible to the so-called 'classic' formulations – including, for example, connections of class and race, or the refusal to consider labor relations in industrial England as the quintessential definition of capitalism. The second is that the African intellectuals problematized the preferential use of the categories of race and ethnicity as explanatory tools of the social and political realities of the continent much before their European colleagues turned against the so called 'identity politics' – which did not occur until the 1980s, when organized movements for ethnic and racial demands joined the older ones organized in terms of gender, threatening to fragment the unitary social foundations of trade unionism in the European countries.

In the works dealt with here, the principal intellectual debates which took place in the Africa of independences found means of expression through fictional narrative constructions in which the protagonism of social change is alternatively conferred on groups who name and define themselves according to distinct categories of identification, implying different

mobilization strategies linked to different projects for future societies. The use of a given category is the reflection of the adoption of a political position amid the disputes of the time, providing evidence of the widespread erudition invested in the process of writing, anchored not only on the literary tradition of the colonial tongue used, but also in the social and political sciences of that epoch, as well as African studies. This not very conventional erudition demands from us a significant effort at intertextual reading which will permit us go beyond the naive assumption that the writers expressed the identity and the culture of 'their people.' To the contrary, African writers of the independences actively sought to participate in the creation of 'their people' through multiple and conflictive identity possibilities, which pointed to operations of inclusion and exclusion of people and groups in the body of the nation and within the state, with quite significant effects. Undoubtedly, the direct impact of a literary work of the time of the independences on the society it interpellated was, as we have seen, almost always restricted. However, this creative effort is indicative of broader processes which the text was positioned in reinforcement of, or against.

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In this article, I have sought to determine the heuristic relevance of reflecting on a set of texts, which I have called the literature of the independences, and to problematize the scale of collective identification categories mobilized in these works through the observation that the emergence of national literature on the continent, shortly before and after the obtaining of political emancipation, sought to construct places for the enunciation of an identitarian discourse which frequently slide from nation to ethnicity, on the one hand, and to race, on the other, always remaining in some sort of tension in relation to class. In the analysis of a small set of works by different African authors, written between 1946 and 1978, in places such as South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and Cameroon, I have sought to highlight the multiple possibilities of connection between these various categories, as well as briefly tracing the ties between the options of identity anchorage engendered in the works and in the broader intellectual debates in the field of African nationalism.

Obviously, in part, this slide points to the local conditions at the time of the production of the work. For example, in the case of Nigeria, the ethnicization process had followed two paths, in parallel to the implementation of colonial domination since the beginning of the nineteenth century – both with the promotion and the standardization, by the Africans themselves, of the ethnic institutions and languages present in the territory, and the differentiated treatment of distinct groups by the colonial administration, which attributed to each ethnicity determined characteristics of temperament and directed the available opportunities of education and employment according to these stereotypes. The result was an independence in the format of a federation of states more or less corresponding to ethnic territories, but with the three largest ethnicities unequally positioned in the state apparatus and independent society (the Yoruba concentrated in the universities, the Ibo

in the public service, and the Hausa in the army). It is interesting that during the Biafran War, through which the state with an Ibo majority tried to separate from the Federation, both the Ibo Achebe and the Yoruba Soyinka stayed on the same side – which shows how much ethnicity was one identity option amongst others, in a scale of possible options, and not a mark with an inescapable and authoritarian origin.

Another part of the explanation resides in how these works fit into the broader field of African nationalism and its many internal conflicts. If we follow the characterization proposed by Mbembe (2001), we can easily approximate the texts of Peter Abrahams, Mongo Beti, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o to what he calls the nationalist current, while the works of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ayi Kwei Armah were closer to the discourses classified as nativist and centered on African identity. It is true that Mbembe dissects in a much more acute manner the nationalist current and dedicates very little space to an analysis of the thinking about the 'native condition.' This could be related to the fact that, while nationalist production had a strong organicity in its concern with the debates about modernization, development, and dependency, to such an extent that Mbembe defines it as Marxist (which certainly does not correspond to the self-representation of a large part of the authors involved), the nativist current rested on a set of much less structured enunciations, in addition to being, in terms of volume of production, much vaster. Mbembe limits himself to showing that for African nativism, the (black) race served as a point of convergence of the tense relationship between two postulates: that of the universality of belonging to humankind and that of the particularity of the specific tradition.

Although Mbembe's analysis is precise and raises critical fundamental questions, principally aimed at the underlying beliefs of political nationalism – from which resulted a large part of its practical limitations in the years following the obtaining of independence – it is necessary to be careful not to reinforce a too rigid dichotomy which usually opposes the proposals of the construction of the state in post-independence, either the 'modernizing' or the 'traditionalist' ones. It is necessary to keep in mind, in first place, that both currents defined by Mbembe interpenetrate each other in the absolute majority of empirical cases, and there are few examples of 'nationalist' thinkers who do not articulate the tension between particularity and universality through race, or of 'nativists' who are not in some form concerned with the forms and the means of the construction of a viable collective future for Africa as a whole, and for its respective countries in particular. Second, it is necessary to understand that all the intellectual projects which sought to think about this collective future are inescapably modernizing, in the sense that they sought to define the terms by which African societies should transform themselves to resume their political autonomy, even if they based the conception of an ideal society on values and institutions associated with tradition.

The reflections made here are, to an extent, the outlining of a research program. We are going through a moment of the strong expansion of the field of African studies in Brazil, and I think this is the time to try to put in dialogue two areas of concentration which had led research in Brazilian universities, but which have also been more tangential than engaged in a collective construction: literary criticism and political history. In this sense, the proposal presented here has three principal orientations. The first is to stop considering the intellectual circuit put into movement by colonial languages as a natural frontier, both in the studies of literature and of history. Even in analyses of Portuguese speaking African countries, a regional approach and a general continental framework can help to correct a certain tendency to fall into an imperial perspective, in which Portugal and its specificities assume a very inflated explanatory value. The second is to intertwine in a much stronger manner African intellectual production, including literature, but not restricted to it, with political history, expanding the space of African formulations both as empirical objects and as intertextual and theoretical references. This does not need to signify the peremptory elimination of references to European authors just for being European, but assessing in a more critical manner the relevance of the various contributions, taking into account African realities and endogenous efforts to deal with them in theoretical and reflexive terms. The third is to suspend the categories of analysis which we inevitably use for African realities. Race, nation, class, and ethnicity, just to mention the ones I directly addressed, are not intrinsic date from the empirical world, nor can they be defined a priori based on this or that classic reference in the social sciences, rather they are collective constructions mobilized in a very diverse series of situations, by a very diverse set of actors, with the most varied political purposes. They have at the same time a descriptive, normative, and mobilizing nature, and the efforts in search of conceptual precision which result from academic debates represent only part of a circular social flux during which they acquire meaning. In the process of their daily use and the production of their effects, each of these categories is transformed and gains a polysemic and multilevel practice which can also be the object of our histories and criticisms.

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