

WHAT SHALL WE THINK ABOUT AN AFROCENTRIC VISION?

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Abstract

This essay was originally a lecture given in Hungarian in Pécs, Hungary, at a conference on African Globalities/Global Africans, the 4th Pécs African Studies Conference on June 9-10, 2016. It starts its analysis with the ancient Greeks, since when, and even more so since Hegel, we have known that in the fields of both thinking and actions, along theses and antitheses, then with luck, along syntheses, “welter” the phrasing of notions and conceptions and the debates over them as well as everyday and historical events. We also know that syntheses many times are born with difficulty. What is more, in many cases, series of theses and antitheses get to grips with each other for a long period of time without the hope of creating a synthesis. And of course, to open the gates elsewhere: this old-world syllogism, as a reflective model, is not sufficient for the interpretation of the realistic and mental entity that inundates us. However, nowadays we can pick up on the specific mental-interpretational ideology that stands out in the form of this model whose essence is Afrocentrism set against the Eurocentric approach (Biernaczky, 2017). This is discussed in the paper.

Keywords

Achebe syndrome, Afrocentrism, historical roots

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1. Antiquity

If we look for its historical roots and we hold on to our syllogism that we use as a methodological crutch, we have to look back as far as the Antiquity. If we consider the wars of conquest of the Roman Empire, colonization, and the dominance formation that stretched over numerous areas and people far beyond the Latins, then we can state that one of the supposedly first manifestations of the European “thesis” can be grabbed here (the very first might be traced back to the conquests of Alexander the Great). Undoubtedly, the founders and governors of the empire (the Romans) were Rome-centric.

But how partial were they racially in point of colonized people (Germanic people, Franks, Hispanic people, people of the Danube region, Egyptians, North Africans, Middle Easterns, etc.) – had discrimination between the untamed and civilized been conceived? Unlike in the case of modern-day Francophonization, colonized people may have managed business more effectively (of course, they had more time for that too): prominent figures of the Roman civilization flowed from Latinized colonies to the center. Pointing at North Africa: numerous high-ranking soldiers, aristocrats, emperors as well as highly educated legists, historians, and thinkers came from the Arabs or Berbers. Among them was Saint Augustine, a significant person in human history. However, in the colonies, as learned from contemporary sources, a kind of colonial commonage was formed of a small number of Romans and a bigger number of locals (their traces can be seen in Hungary too; e.g., statuettes with black African features were also excavated). Without fail, the colonization of the Roman period could be described with at least as much if not more violence and barbarity than the modern-day colonization (not mentioning the Germanic Vandals’ age-long North African presence). Supposedly, extensive research and analysis would be necessary to discover whether the nowadays so many times emerging racism was present before, and if so, then in what form it was present in contemporary thinking.

2. Early modern history

Now let’s jump in time. In his excellent book (*Die “Wilden” und die “Zivilisierten”* [The Savages and the Civilized], 1976), essentially, Urs Bitterli tries to find the origin of racism (ethnic prejudice), marking the still remaining European behavior born through meeting the people of nature.

The inability to intellectually process archaic cultures – leading to violent measures in politics – reinforced the philosophical-psychological discrimination of other races. The Europeans’ uncertainty during the cultural encounter was tendentially not replaced by a serious endeavor to objectively research the alien culture. Instead, they judged the indigenous people, disregarding any nuance in their culture, and finally, calling these peoples ‘barbaric’ and ‘savages,’ thus rendering them inferior once and for all.

To give an example of all these, we quote the book of John Lubbock (*The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Condition of Man*, first published in 1870), which is well-known by the Hungarian audience too, in which the author refers to the

gradually-accessed people of nature as modern-day barbarians, distinguishing them from the people of the Antiquity. His book is prepossessed by the 19th century's general superiority of Europe. Quoting a certain writing of Carl Lichtenstein (*Travels in Southern Africa*, 1803-1804), he emphasizes that an impartial comparative naturalist sees these people (the Bushmen, that is, the San people) in tighter connection with gorillas and chimpanzees than with Kant or Goethe.

Nevertheless, the first serious (European or white) thesis is, without doubt, the differentiation between the wild and civilized people, particularly in the context of the slave trade (even if it has significant Arab and Oriental respects as well as serious African connections). We can also say that grading non-European people (mostly Africans) as wilds (until the strengthening of abolitionism) serves as self-justification in this regard. The other (European or white) thesis that can be regarded as more widespread and longer-range than slave trade is colonialism itself. According to Gert V. Paczensky (1974), its history is nothing else but a series of disappointments caused by whites to the inhabitants of "colorful" continents. We can discover only distant traces of antitheses in those centuries. In this regard, it is worth thumbing through Giuseppe Cocchiara's book, *L'Eterno Selvaggio* (1961). He points out that, without fail, it is Michel Montaigne who – being in the possession of the knowledge about the people of the new world – first cautioned his readers in his notable *Essais* (1580) not to name everything barbarian that was nothing else but unusual. But the Italian scholar brings our attention to the attitude of Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau too, who – following Lafitau, the father of modern ethnology – professed the myth of the good savage, what is more, they even resonated with Lafitau's views according to which the cultural standard of American Indians was not low at all and could be compared to that of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Cocchiara also treats his countryman's, Giambattista Vico's (1668–1774) outstanding writing, *Principi di Una Scienza Nuova Intorno alla Natura delle Nazioni* (1725). Correcting Lafitau's deception, that he considered those wild people the first representatives of humanity, Vico states that primitive is a kind of "prior" that forever lives within and returns from time to time to our conscience. That is, Vico establishes an evolutionary theory that is true to all people.

Antitheses have a strange role in this series – either in the wake of the works of Cocchiara or also those of others from other Europeans to Johann Gottlieb Herder (1744-1803), whose name is connected to the solution of the myth of the good savage by turning it into the myth of the good people. On the other hand, his memento of centuries, that is, his first folklore collection (the *Volkslieder* of 1778–1779 that aims to "give sound" to the people of the world), of which second edition (*Stimmen der Völker in Liedern*, 1807) a Malgas folk song cycle was included into, is considered one of the first representatives of living African folk culture.

The movement starting in the late 17th century that demanded abolition can be regarded as the most significant representation of big antitheses. Its unrivaled documents are the books of abbot Henri Grégoire (1970-1831) (*De la Littérature des Nègres*, 1808, and *De la Traite et de l'Esclavage des Noirs et des Blancs*, 1815), who

otherwise played an important role in the French Revolution too. Among his books the first is the one that introduces African and Afro-American personages known till then, straining for completeness together with rich annotations. Even though we only discovered their existence only in the 20th century, we cannot forget about those Africans who had been the indicators of a big change regarding the view and worldwide role of African history, culture, and literature. Let alone late-Christian literature and the rich learnings that lead us to Ethiopian scholars, first we need to mention the North African, Moroccan Muslim scholar and traveler Ibn Battuta (1304–1368 or 1369).

He, if that is true, traveled 121.000 km in his lifetime. In his “traveling book” (*Rihla*, published only from the 19th century), within Africa, besides Egypt in a longer chapter, we can see the world of the old Mali Empire, which matches any contemporary European court and is famous for the Epic of Sundiata, unfold.

Furthermore, we have to mention Leo Africanus (c. 1494–c. 1554), a Berber Muslim born in Andalusia, who later became a slave of the pope. He compiled a remarkable volume in Italian (*Della Descrittione dell’Africa et delle Cose Notabili che Ivi Sono*, 1550) about mostly North African territories and people that were unknown at that time for Europe. Later he left Rome and after returning to North Africa he disappeared in history. We cannot forget about the illustrious annals of Songhai scholars (Mahmud al-Kati, 1468–?, Ahmad Baba, 1556–1627, and Abd el-Rahman al-Sadi, 1596 –c. 1656). Finally, we have to mention the so-called, relatively late-discovered, slave narrative. Till now we know about dozens of freed slaves who, having received the opportunity for learning, created remarkable literature in the 18th-19th centuries. The Nigerian-born Igbo Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745–1797), who, after his kidnap to America, got into England, excelled among them. He might be the first African who stepped up against slavery in his memoir (*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, 1789) that revives his childhood (that is, African) memories.

3. The ‘Achebe syndrome’

Let’s turn our attention now to yesterday’s and today’s reality. In his essay of 1977 (*An Image of Africa*) that, even today, kindles debates, Chinua Achebe states that Joseph Conrad reflects a racist approach in his novel (*Heart of Darkness*, 1899), which today is rated as a classic piece of literature. That time even his best friends denied the prominent Nigerian writer’s statement. It is a fact that Conrad’s novel first

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seems as if it is a version of the so-called ‘the civilized and the savages’ theme. But if we look deeper to understand the writing either in terms of semiotic research or according to the concepts of Clifford Gertz (1973), we will see that:

1. The protagonist captain, with whom the author does not identify himself (!), undertakes a voyage on the Congo River, which is meant to represent the actors of colonialism. He is a semiliterate, rude but not quite bad person, who turns to his white colonizer compeers with utter revulsion. He only shows human feelings when during the voyage a black fireman is shot next to him. (!)
2. The momentum that needs the most explanation is the misrepresentation of local Africans as savages (at the end of the voyage the description of savages who lurk in the forest). However, this is also part of the contemporary approach (that is sorely condemned by the writer in an indirect way) that helps legitimize the whites’ plunder, and if necessary, the murder of these African people.
3. But only in the deepest level of the novel can we find a continuous reminder: when putting into a specific semantic setting, the regular mention of ivory (elephant tusk) as a kind of semiotic sign shouts and warns about and refers to the Europeans’ utilitarian, devastating savagery that wades through everything.

The analysis could go on and on but for now, summing it up: in our view, Conrad’s writing is (one of the) first significant Afrocentric (or Euro-African?) work(s) that is an *antithesis* with advanced *synthesis*. To this will join then *Batouala* by René Maran (1921) intensified by André Gide’s guidebooks of the Congo and Chad (*Voyage au Congo*, 1927, *Le Retour du Tchad*, 1928).

Let us add straightaway that synthesis comes into being just in Chinua Achebe’s two vitally important novels that are placed into an Igbo setting (*Things Fall Apart*, 1958, *Arrow of God*, 1964). Why is that? Partly because, reminiscent of the works of Maran, a human-sized traditional African world stands out in them. However, transgressing Maran, Achebe introduces realistic white figures too and discloses everyday activities and celebrations of the local population who are torn between traditions and modernism, old beliefs and Christianity, black interests (subsistence, providing for the family at home and on the fields) and white interests (trade = exploitation). This seems to confirm Mandela’s message: Achebe “brought Africa to the rest of the world.”

I have mentioned at the start of this essay that reality often steps over the adaptability of syllogism: that is, Achebe created the synthesis of Eurocentric and Afrocentric approaches in both his two novels, where he introduced his evidently edifying but thought of as one-sided antithesis.

4. Afrocentrism – a movement and its limits

It might be surprising that the seedbed of the so-called Afrocentric worldview of the 1980s (that became popular mainly in the US and among the American blacks) might have been somewhere in Achebe’s failed attack against Conrad, which authors refer to a number of times recently. Beyond question, its roots must be looked for in the

Négritude movement. As we have been writing about it several times before, unlike Sartre, we do not consider this literary trend “racism against racism.” We see in it the search for the emancipation of a significant segment of world culture. In so far, the Négritude movement that was mostly founded by Senghor and Césaire can be graded simultaneously as antithesis and synthesis.

Now let’s see what M. K. Asante says, who covers the topic of a new African thesis in several books:

“...Afrocentrist seeks to uncover and use codes, paradigms, symbols, motifs, myths, and circles of discussion that reinforce the centrality of African ideas and values as a valid frame of reference for acquiring and examining data”

(Asante, 1990: 6).

Of course, this definition is acceptable on its own, but just in the Afrocentric “analysis-mass” that arose and grew into a movement under Asante’s influence can we discover substantial partiality (while the real and factual cultural values are little discussed). That is, we can say again what Sartre said in the case of the Négritude movement: racism against racism. So much the more, because by slightly stepping back in time, we encounter analyses like the also Nigerian Igbo Elechi Amadi’s book (*Ethics in Nigerian Culture*, 1982). He convincingly opens up how the European foray, white dominance, and their different culture destroy traditional “moral tethers” in both public and political spheres.

Into the sphere of a search for synthesis only Senghor’s old-new idea, that is, the *métissage* (“only the blending of cultures and people can create new values in the life of any society”) could be lifted, despite its not slightly confident and romantic nature. There are also positive and negative examples of his theses.

5. An epoch-making work: synthesis or a recent antithesis?

One of the last books of the outstanding British ethnologist, cultural anthropologist, and philosopher of history, Jack Goody (1919-2015), is entitled *The Theft of History*. In this, he aims to prove that both the Orient and Africa are a sterling part of world history even though Europe “actually stole” world history from the people of these continents.

The introduction precisely sums up what the author was thinking of when he entitled his book:

“The ‘theft of history’ of the title refers to the take-over of history by the west. That is, the past is conceptualized and presented according to what happened on the provincial scale of Europe, often western Europe, and then imposed upon the rest of the world. That continent makes many claims to have invented a range of value-laden institutions such as ‘democracy,’ mercantile ‘capitalism,’ freedom, individualism. However, these institutions are found over a much more widespread range of human societies. I argue that the same is true of certain emotions such as love (or romantic

love) which have often been seen as having appeared in Europe alone in the twelfth century and as being intrinsic to the modernization of the west (the urban family, for example)” (Goody, 2006: 1).

Appropos Africa, based on his one-time Ghanaian field work, he then notes:

“After several years’ residence among African ‘tribes’ as well as in a simple kingdom in Ghana, I came to question a number of the claims Europeans make to have ‘invented’ forms of government (such as democracy), forms of kinship (such as the nuclear family), forms of exchange (such as the market), forms of justice, when embryonically at least these were widely present elsewhere”

(Goody, 2006: 2).

Here Goody does not mention it but he formulates it many times later in his book: Asia and Africa are also part of world history. Africa also possesses history even if it is not written but oral history (see the works of Jan Vansina, to discover his prominently important role in this regard, that is, however, not touched upon by Goody this time, as well as Goody’s own importance regarding the question of oral and written traditions).

Now we only refer to the categories listed by Goody that are considered European “inventions.”

Regarding *democracy*, this concept actually does not exist in traditional Africa. But then we can mention a whole line of tribal formations where a kind of “tribal commonage” is justified and living conditions can be described as democratic. Not talking about smaller communities where people living within strictly controlled boundaries can live with decorum. Besides communal leadership/governance (tribal leaders were charged with lots of communal responsibilities), we can line up the rich network of kinship that was also to provide dignified living circumstances. However, this system was one of the main obstacles to the conception of feudalism based on land ownership in Africa.

Local and longer-term *commerce* (mercantile) was mentioned in 1963 in a large treatise that embraced numerous African people (Bohannan and Dalton, 1965). But we can quote from Eric R. Wolf’s volume, *Europe and the People Without History*, too to reveal the rich marks of North and West African trade that we can trace back even to the Antiquity (e.g., by Leo Frobenius):

“The trade routes through Western Sahara to Morocco and Algeria lay mainly in the hands of Mande-speaking Dyula traders, who had expanded southward from Jenne... to Bergho the major collecting point for gold and forest products on the edge of the forest zone. The eastern trade routes to Tunisia and Libya connected up with the commercial network of the Hausa, who traded south toward the forest from the city of Kano in northern Nigeria and from other Hausa towns” (Wolf, 1990: 39).

As democratism, so the African existence of the *foundation of the state* and a *viable society* (human or humanistic society) has been widely proven, analyzed, and richly

discussed subjects. From the end of the first millennium, we have known about greater or lesser principalities. The most interesting might be the first: presumably, the Soninke established the ancient Ghanaian (Ghanata) state (Aukar State, as mentioned by Wolf) in the 800s. A Senegalese scholar (Bathily, 1989) reports about its late survival. Regarding *justice*, West African empires (see the Ashanti Kingdom) had a refined, complex legal system that resembled western proceedings of which today we have libraries of materials at our service.

Capitalism in Africa did not evolve (see the works of Goody or Csaba Ecsedy). Conversely, in accordance with commercial needs, currency did exist: see the monetary role of cowry shells, the gold dust of the Ashanti Kingdom as well as copper (and in the royal court, gold) statuettes that served as measurements.

In the matter of *freedom and individualism* we present two examples from our own research: 1. Almost in every tribal kingdom, royal house or significant noble family we can find bards/storytellers (griot in West Africa or imbongi/orator in the South African Zulu culture). They served not only as a “storage” of the past but as kinds of advisors and critics when needed. 2. Regarding the subject of appearance and the development of personality, it is worth to look into the works of Emil Torday and read what he had to say about the enlightened Kuba kings who reigned during his field work.

The subject of romantic love also leads us to our own researches. I published a voluminous essay in 2007 about African love, eroticism, and obscenity, going along with Evans-Pritchard who states that in Africa there is no obscenity; words that might be indecent for the European ear are actually “ritual tethers” for Africans. But then I have found several amorous expressions in the early examples (and also those after the end of the 19th century) of both female and male poetry. An Ethiopian Galla (or Oromo) song will serve as an example here (translated into English by Cerulli):

*If I might be an ox,
An ox, a beautiful ox,
Beautiful but stubborn,
The merchant would buy me,
Would buy and slaughter me,
Would spread my skin,
Would bring me to the market.*

“The eastern trade routes to Tunisia and Libya connected up with the commercial network of the Hausa, who traded south toward the forest from the city of Kano in northern Nigeria and from other Hausa towns.”

*The coarse woman would bargain for me;
The beautiful girl would buy me,
She would crush perfumes for me,
I would spend the night rolled up around her;
I would spend the afternoon rolled up around her.
Her husband would say, "It is a dead skin!"
But I would have my love!*

(Cerulli, 1922: 78)

The collector notes that the singer longs to become a cloak of skin to be worn by his sweetheart.

6. Moral and suggestion

At the end of our essay, in which we have resorted to the tools of three fields of science (philosophy of history, ethnology, study of literature as well as folklorism), we think that the only viable route to introduce the facts and values of African history and culture into the circulation of world history (i.e., building these into world history, world culture, world literature, etc.) is to aspire, factually, without bias to the following goals:

- The exploration, collection, and inventorying of the multiple social and cultural values of Africa (see Senghor, 1988)
- Global cooperation for the “full” cognition of Africa
- A moderate, objective, and balanced Afro-centric vision to be enforced worldwide, with respect to the full introduction of African values into world culture
- Urging the shaping of a world view of both the European and the African side within which Africa can be inserted into world culture in a natural way. ☀

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