Chapter 8

Southern African Identity:
A Critical Assessment

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Introduction

The subject of Southern African identity has to be considered against the background of a complex historical process that spans more than 300 year s, and during which both Africa itself and Southern Africa in particular were moulded and shaped into geo-political *concepts* and *constructs*, after the image of an "expanding" and "conquering" Europe. It is a period charac - terised by *two contending world views*: the C*aucasian* one, on the basis of which contemporary Africa—and Southern Africa—have been defined, and remain largely intact today; and the *African nationalist* (or *Pan-Africanist*) identity, seeking to re-assert itself in the course of the struggle against European economic, social, cultural, racial and political domination. As this chapter will try to illustrate, the struggle between these contending world views remains largely unresolved. Instead, the struggle for the African recovery appears for the time being compromised by the enduring legacy of the *caucasian* world order.

African identity in general—and Southern African identity in particular—is necessarily a reflection of this historical transition. Against this background must be considered not only the historical, socio-economic bases of the key determinant of identity in Southern Africa—i.e. *race,* but also the issue of *class* and *ethnic* identity, including other derived identities, such as those of "colour". Therefore, i t requires some focus on the nature and extent of the social engineering that characterised white racial domination—and *apartheid*—in Southern Africa; and an account of the complex interrelationship between race, colour and class identity in the Southern African context, including *ethnic* or "tribal" identification and *conflict*. The impact of all these factors on national situations—particularly the *National*

Question itself, and the problem of the (African) *nation-state-in-the-making*—is quite obvious and will receive brief mention. However, it is the main purpose of this chapter to assess so-called *Southern African identity* against the background of the two contending world views, in the context of the political economy of race, colour and class, and in relation to so-called *post-apartheid South Africa*. The problem of South African—or Southern African *exceptionalism*—will be presented as part of this identity crisis, as well as how this in turn impacts on the quest for regional co-operation and integration in both the Southern African sub-region itself, and in Africa generally.

The Caucasian world view and the political economy of race, ethnicity and class in Southern Africa

As has already been intimated, it was the *Caucasian* world view in terms of which Africa in general and Southern Africa in particular have been defined and developed as geo-political *concepts* or *constructs.* The following are the key elements in this historical process: the "European expansionism" which heralded the insertion of Africa into the international economic system, and began formally with the occupation of the Cape in 1652, in what thereby constituted the origins of this *Southern Africa*; the systematic conquest and wholesale destruction of African societies, particularly those of Southern Africa; the era of formal colonialism in the nineteenth century, particularly that given implicitly in the Cape-to-Cairo dream of British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes; and contemporary neo-colonialism, with its emphasis on the *continuity* of the colonial-type economy and the legacy of the post-colonial state.

To that extent, there is really nothing that is *Afrikan* about contemporary Africa, which is a *geo-political construct* that reflects more the image of those who made it over the 400 years or more that represent the continent's plunder and exploitation, than the *Afrika* that ought to have been recovered with post-colonialism. Indeed, if you look around us, there is little or nothing that is *Afrikan* about us: culturally, politically and economically, we are nothing but an appendage of Europe. What is *Afrikan* about the post-colonial state, when it is no more than a caretaker for those who govern our globe?

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And what is so *Afrikan* about the post-colonial economy—if such a category does exist in these historical circumstances—when it is in reality a colonial-type one, exporting its raw materials for the industrial development of the northern hemisphere, and importing finished products to the detriment of its own industrialisation and employment opportunities? Indeed, what is *Afrikan* about the so-called *African middle class*, particularly that fraction of it that inherited (neo-colonial) power, when by its very nature it is largely *compradorian* and either *franco-phone*, *anglo-phone*, or *luso-phone*?

However, Southern Africa itself is a magnified version of this larger *geo-political concept* that is contemporary Africa. As a *geo-political construct* and *concept,* Southern Africa is no more than a reflection of the historical and socio-economic forces that almost succeeded in moulding it into a *White Dominion.* The colonialist agenda in Southern Africa was quite different from that which applied to the rest of Africa, in that implicitly, there was always the goal of creating *White Dominions* similar to those of Australia, Canada or New Zealand. Therefore, the logical expectations contained in such terms as the *Union of South Africa*, *Portuguese East Africa* (or *Portuguese Africa*, since Angola, Guinea Bissau and Mozambique were, in this colonial order, "provinces" of Portugal)—and the *self-governing colony of Southern Rhodesia*, not to mention the related attempt to extend the latter into the "Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland". Apartheid South Africa was, of course, an approximation of the *White Dominion* status; and the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in "Rhodesia" was but a vain attempt at the same. In the end, it was *white Southern Africa* as a whole that sought to roll back the advance of the African nationalist struggle in Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa. There was also the intersection between the interests of white settler colonialism on the one hand, and those of a Western bloc and its Cold War imperatives on the other. This has to be borne in mind as a determining factor in the "historic compromises" that constituted a peculiar form of *decolonisation,* particularly in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa.

Southern African identity or Southern African exceptionalism

Throughout the period of the Liberation Struggle, Southern Africa epitomised, in many respects, Africa's hope for recovery and restoration. This goal was best expressed by one of Africa's luminaries—Amilcar Cabral—in this period of the struggle:

> We are from the part of Africa which the imperialists call Black Africa. Yes, we are Black. But we are men like all other men. Our countries are economically backward. Our people are at a specific historical stage characterised by this backward condition of our economy. We must be conscious of this. We are African peoples, we have not invented many things, we do not possess today the special weapons which others possess, we have no big factories, we don't even have for our children the toys which other children have, but we do have our own hearts, our own heads, our own history. It is this history which the colonialists have taken from us. The colonialists usually say that it was they who brought us into history: today we show that this is not so. They made us leave history, our history, to follow them, right at the back, to follow the progress of their history. Today, in taking up arms to liberate ourselves, in following the example of other peoples who have taken up arms to liberate themselves, we want to return to our history, on our own feet, by our own means and through our own sacrifices.

The hope was that liberation itself would constitute a redefinition of Africa and Southern Africa; away from that geo-political concept to which reference was made in the introduction of this chapter—to one based on an *African identity* established through the resolution of the *National Question.* Prior to 1994, therefore, Southern Africa had a poignant meaning for those who identified with the struggle: it was a rallying call for all of Africa to rid itself of the last vestiges of colonialist domination. Therefore, there is a dual significance in the kind of "compromises" that the African nationalists have had to conclude with the former white settlers in Southern Africa. The first is

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obvious: that the agenda of the Liberation Struggle has not been fully realised and that decolonisation in Southern Africa has to be viewed not as the overnight event that was experienced throughout the rest of Africa, but as a difficult transition with many twists and turns, This is particularly so also because of the intersection between the historical and socio-economic exceptionalism of Southern Africa on the one hand, and, on the other, the global forces which have vested interests in their own continuity and are prepared to ensure that the new African states adhere to those rules and regulations of international capital. Hence the *constitutions* themselves are more than an expression of the *compromise;* they constitute the virtual guarantee—especially through the *Bill of Rights*—for (economic) *continuity,* in the maintenance of the old social relations of production, and even a "formal blessing" of the property ownership scheme that was established under white settler colonialism and *apartheid*. The only difference is that the "historically disadvantaged" can now all aspire to this new "meritocracy" while, in reality, it is only a lucky few who will make it.

Secondly, both the historical bases of Southern Africa and the "historic compromises" (made as part of this particular decolonisation process) account for the new kind of exceptionalism that is characteristic of the sub-region in general and South Africa in particular. It is an exceptionalist identity that turns history upside down: it is one not based on a critique of the incompleteness of the liberatory process; but on the contrary, an implicit attempt to extol it as the basis of a new vision—the *African Renaissance*—for the continent. This is part of the *new ideology of self-deception*, the refusal to acknowledge the current realities that parameter even our own political space as Africans—nationally, regionally and globally. As Jonathan Moyo has pointed out, the term *African Renaissance* poses the danger of masking realities in South Africa itself, while also speaking to a kind of exceptionalism that sets aside that country and the rest of the continent. Yet the attempt to *exceptionalise* South Africa is not so new. There was the old debate, in "white leftist" circles in particular, about "internal colonialism" or the implicit claim that South Africa was not a conventional "colonial case" and therefore not subject to the kind of decolonisation that had been attendant to most of Africa. Then there was the exceptionalism based on the sheer

number of Whites, or even the temptation to make the latter the single most important factor in any political (or economic) calculati on about the future of South Africa and Southern Africa. Indeed, it is difficult not to conclude that most of what has come to be in South Africa and Southern Africa is an outcome of such (racial) considerations.

Therefore, there is a real danger in this post-1994 period, of confusing *Southern African_identity* with the negative exceptionalism that is not only anti-Pan Africanist, but also a reflection of the preferential treatment that South Africa and Southern Africa receive from the international community, more often than not at the expense and disdain of the rest of the African continent. The point is that other Africans complain about this and cite it as one of the issues that undermines both interregional co-operation *and* the goal of African Unity. Clearly, South African and Southern African excep-tionalism is one of the root causes of the conflict between the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). This exceptionalism is therefore not confined to South Africa alone, even though it is most pronounced in that country. It is a Southern African disease: for example, before (post-apartheid) South Africa, Zimbabwe was just as guilty of this, with such neighbours as Botswana, Zambia and Malawi complaining about its dominance in the field of trade relations; and it is ironic now, that Zimbabwe herself should scream the loudest about South Africa's economic hegemony in the sub-region.

Toward a Southern African community?

The foregoing helps to highlight the constraints to regional co-operation and integration at both the sub-regional and continental levels. These constraints are broadly threefold, and are interrelated. First, there is the problem of vertical integration into the northern hemisphere. This is part of the historical and colonial legacy—reference to which was made at length in the opening paragraphs of this chapter. It expresses itself in the endless competition among African states for aid, access to markets, and even preferential treatment at the hands of elements in the northern hemisphere. This creates a "hierarchy of powers" at both the continental and sub-regional levels, undermining the potential for co-ordination and collaboration at the levels of

interstate and inter-institutional processes. Secondly, there is the problem of uneven and unequal development within and between the African countries themselves, not to mention that between the sub-regional blocs-in-the-making. Among many other things, this complicates the process of trying to reconcile competing interests among member states, and renders difficult the task of joint mobilisation of resources for programme development. Thirdly, is the problem of the nation-state-in-the-making. Reference has already been made to this in the foregoing section of this chapter. However, the point to emphasise here is that unstable and insecure *nation-states* are inimical to the enterprise of regional cooperation and integration.

Therefore, it is far too early to speak of a *Southern African community*, let alone an organic *Southern African identity*. At worst, it is a double-faced identity: on the one hand, reflecting a sub-region defined in terms of the process of domination and colonisation; and, on the other, as an expression of intent, an ideology of a liberation struggle during which Southern Africa became a rallying call for the resolution of the *National Question.*

This is an ambivalence that can be resolved only in the context of renewed Pan Africanism; in the honest acknowledgement and genuine determination to confront the historical, political and economic factors that currently define Africa and Southern Africa; and in the realisation that the broader strategy and goal of African unity must prevail, carry and pervade both national and sub-regional efforts.