How Africa Misunderstood the West
The Failure of Anti-West Radicalism and Postmodernity

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In the past few years, the anti-West, anti-imperialist tradition of Afrocentric discourse appears to have either collapsed or undergone a drastic de-radicalisation. So sudden has been the eclipse or total exit from the Afrocentric horizon, of the radical, fire-spitting anti-West intellectual/agitator, whether of the left or of the right, that many may not hesitate to look for an explanation in the most momentous event of the decade, namely, the end of Soviet legitimated planetary communism and the emergence of a post-cold war era. No doubt, many radical anti-imperialist Afrocentrics did indeed feel, soon after the disappearance of the communist demiurge, so orphaned and so disinherited that they either retired into oblivion or slowly and surreptitiously converted. But then not all radical critics of the West sourced their codes or their grants from the Kremlin. Indeed the tradition of conservative anti-westernism represented by Afrocentrics like Cheik Anta Diop and Chinweizu among others, has been probably more influential than Marxist based motifs, in shaping contemporary African perception of the West. The truth appears to be that even this conservative (ie non Marxian) strand of African anti-imperialism has also recently lost its radicality if not its voice. It may therefore not be entirely implausible to ascribe the waning of African anti-West discourse to the fall of the Berlin Wall. However, while that event undoubtedly brought about an international paradigm shift that necessarily affected the fate of anti-imperialism in Africa and elsewhere, it would appear on closer examination that even if the Berlin Wall had not fallen, Afrocentric critique of the West would still have suffered its present fate, namely, it would still have remained a largely ineffectual posturing, a discourse bereft of performative force, a failed attempt to get a hearing from the West. Here we are speculating that Afrocentric critique of the West seems to have never really hit its target: the mind of what can be called the ‘essential West’.

Now, the obvious answer to the question of Africa’s failure to elicit a commensurate moral, intellectual or policy response from Europe would be that Africa has proved to be too inconsequential an economic or political player to get Europe to apprehend even its hostility-to-the-West discourse. My thinking is that were Europe to apprehend it, the situation would not have been much different. I will argue that from internal, ie Euro-western evidence, the reasoning of the essential West seems to be simply impermeable to the types of anti-imperialist charges and accusations brought against it by the Afrocentric critic. Between, on the one hand, what Afrocentric Africa thinks Europe is — what impels her world-historical
actions and what some less inhibited European thinkers say Europe is — and why she does what she does on the other hand, there seems to be a Berlin Wall that may explain the opacity of the real West to Africa’s impassioned attempts to get a moral-historical hearing from it.

The object of this paper is to reappraise, in the light of current knowledge especially on the structure of western imperial thinking, the grounds and claims of the whole project of Africa’s radical critique of the West in order to suggest that its failure, ie its lack of performative force on its target, is not accidental or purely political, but stems mostly from our basic misunderstanding of the imperial mind, notably, the mute foundations of its historical rationality, the cultural/civilisational drives and impulses that impel its world-historical actions in the imperial and post-imperial eras. Today new insights into the workings of Europe’s modernist/historical rationality have become available thanks to the latest shift in western thinking and sensibility generally referred to as postmodernism. However, here, our understanding of postmodernism has been narrowed to mean a mode of thinking or a set of gestures that seeks drastically to deconstruct, or unmask, western reason/power practices most appropriately at a time when Europe, having virtually completed its world-historical mission and ensured for itself a permanent immunity against reprisals, can afford the coquetry or cynical luxury of drastic self-unmaskings and confessional openness. But aside from this penchant for self-demyystificatory bluntness, one very significant feature of the postmodernist turn is the revival of interest in Nietzsche, seen, most interestingly, as the proto-postmodernist. Among modern European thinkers, Nietzsche stands out (along with Sade perhaps) as the one who set aside the seduction and comfort of the Enlightenment self-understanding of Europe in order to prosecute a more naturalistic theory of its modernist society, civilisation and history. His critique of Europe’s modernist project was therefore like a dynamite that exploded through all the scaffolds of Europe’s world, leaving behind nothing but the nature-like instincts and impulses that drive it. The successors to Nietzsche such as Lyotard and Foucault have, in postmodernity, actualised this Nietzschean cultural deconstructionism mostly by putting it in the vocabulary of the age. We hope to combine both the insights of Nietzsche, the proto-postmodernist, with the vocabularies of Lyotard or Foucault, the practising postmodernists, to try to tackle the cultural/civilisational backdrop to Europe’s imperviousness to the ‘sins’ imputed to it by Afrocentric anti-imperialists. The current revival of the civilisational/cultural angle to the ‘West versus the Rest’ debate provides an appropriate context for this cultural study into the constituting conditions of western world-historical thinking.

I shall begin by revisiting briefly the grounds and claims of the Afrocentric critique of Europe, then I shall pit their arguments against what the postmodernists, read largely over the shoulders of Nietzsche, have said about the imperial or post-imperial rationality of the West.

As we know, the immediate task before the African postcolonial thinker was to carry out a comprehensive critique of colonial culture and European imperialism. Two currents of African thought contended for the execution of this task: (1) Revolutionary/ Marxist anti-imperialism inaugurated by Nkrumah and continued thereafter by a myriad of leftist intellectuals; (2) neo-conservative, Afrocentric anti-West radicalism pioneered by Cheik Anta Diop’s Nations nègres et culture, but actualised and popularised by Chinweizu through such works as The West and the Rest of Us, Towards a Decolonization of African Literature, etc. Though the first current, ie revolutionary anti-West dialectics, at certain moments of Africa’s postcolonial history exerted some degree of influence in shaping perceptions of and relationship with the West, it is actually the second, the neo-conservative Afrocentric strand, that seems to have put in place the paradigmatic idiom and codes of the Africa versus the West selfunderstanding of the cultural-cum-political thought of contemporary Africa. It is therefore on this current of African anti-imperialism that we shall focus our critical attention. However, whether of the left or of the right, the verdict of Africa’s postcolonial reinterpretation of European colonialism/imperialism was unmitigatedly the same: namely, Europe is guilty of underdeveloping Africa and bears responsibility for Africa’s past and present woes. The task before the Afrocentric thinker therefore was not only to work to show “how Europe underdeveloped Africa” but more crucially, to convince Europe of her historical guilt against and responsibility towards Africa. Accordingly, contemporary Afrocentric counter-West discourse has come to be, in many respects,
synonymous with perpetual accusation of the West, the search for historical guilt and moral responsibility, the denunciation of western duplicity, hypocrisy and cynical amoralism. The current clamour for reparations seems to be the logical culmination of the Afrocentric’s relentless trials and convictions of the West.

One most notable example of this accusatory, conspiratorial apprehension of Europe’s intervention in Africa is Chinweizu’s book *The West and the Rest of Us*. Forcefully polemical and comprehensive in scope, the book is often cited as a summation of Africa’s historical, moral and political grievances against Europe. The author considers it to be,

...a critical investigation into the purposes and styles of western imperialist expansion during the past five hundred years, and, within the context of that expansion, into the man-made causes of Africa’s backwardness.

At the end of that investigation, his findings are overwhelming and his verdict unmitigated. For 500 years, the West has conspired systematically to dehumanise Africa, first by enslaving its people, then colonising them and finally reducing them to the present half-life condition of perpetual underdevelopment, poverty, instability, etc. Today, the West’s world power systems — the monetary system, world trade, loans policy, foreign aid, etc — are carefully designed traps aimed at keeping Africa perpetually at the West’s feet. Based on this, Chinweizu declares a near total war against the West and launches a campaign of a second, postcolonial emancipation from it.

Judged strictly on its own Afrocentric terms, Chinweizu’s case against Europe looks weighty. So many other but less aggressive Afrocentrics condemn Europe in no less unmitigated terms. There is, however, the trouble that the enemy, ie the essential West, might not even be aware of the Afrocentric’s case against it, let alone take its verdict into account. To the best of my knowledge, Europe has yet to take any moral or policy stand commanded by the nature and magnitude of the crimes imputed to it (eg paying reparation, offering a public apology and perhaps undertaking to be better behaved in the future). For an insight into one possible explanation for Europe’s indifference *vis-à-vis* the charges against it, let’s listen to what Nietzsche, via the postmodernists, has to tell us about the ways of the essential West.

In seeking to divest Europe’s modernity of its self-gratifying enlightenment claims and postures, Nietzsche isolated a non-enlightenment impulse, the will to power as a kind of ‘biocultural’ principle; the foundational, subjectless, overdetermining mover of men and the world. “The world is will to power and nothing else beside”. Today the Nietzschean power theory has been reactualised by Foucault through his “genealogical criticism”, a mode of thinking which seeks to uncover the power practices, ie the practices of domination which men, societies or institutions try to conceal through different masks and ‘technologies of power’. In Foucault’s genealogical practices, Europe’s higher ideals such as truth, morality, or knowledge come off as mere modalities of power (ie, technique of domination) either as masks or instruments. This is hardly surprising given that to him power is foundational and invincible:

The only thing that lasts is power, which appears with ever new masks in the change of anonymous processes of overpowering.

Above all, power is the meaning of the countless events that appear to drive history:

An ‘event’... is not a decision, a treaty, a reign or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it, a feeble domination that poisons itself as it grows lax, the entry of a masked other.

One outcome of this Nietzschean-Foucault power theory is the opening up of fresh insights into the workings of the mind of the essential West. By ‘essential West’ we mean the West whose essence is indistinguishable from her idea of a distinct world-historical destiny, actualising itself in endless but specific world-domination drives and activities. Given that the will to power can be considered as a major or even foundational self-representation of this essential Europe in modernity, the question is not whether it is true or false, adequate or inadequate. On the contrary, coming out as it is from right inside the western mind itself, the power theory should be taken at face value: that is the way the West, or at any rate, the essential West, views itself. On that score, the power metaphor might prove a particularly useful
handle on the West, especially in its relationship with the Rest. So the question now is, how does this Europe’s will to power operate in world-history? How has it impinged on Africa? In other words, given the Nietzschean power hypothesis, how can one explain certain forms of European historical actions like the slave trade, colonialism, neocolonialism etc, vis-à-vis those in Africa who suffered from them or continue to suffer from them?

The consensus among most Afrocentric intellectuals is that these acts — slavery, imperialism, etc — were unjust acts of violence, a thievery without parallel, a deliberate negation of the human dignity of the African. Chinweizu calls them “the assault by the West on the Rest of Us” and speaks of the “holocaust of slavery, the trauma of invasion and conquest, the humiliation and complexes of occupation... a systematic and continuing impoverishment”.7 For Marcien Towa, imperial domination is “a crime of ‘bèse-humanité’ and must be considered as absolute evil”.8 Beneath these highly emotive terms is, of course, the unmistakable assumption that these acts were/were morally wrong, unjust and bad. In other words, by being imperialistic, Europe was/is deliberately and wickedly conspiring to negate our being and trample upon our dignity as Africans. This itself presupposes another assumption, namely that Europe had/has the choice not to engage in such acts. Not surprisingly, of all the criticisms levelled against Europe one of the most widely believed is that the West is a cynical pack of imperialist demons who know the good but still go ahead to do the bad and the wrong.

Now assuming that these acts were immoral and unjust, with regard to which order, which system of justice are they so? Who feels that these actions were trauma, a holocaust and a humiliation and why? The Afrocentric totalised moral judgement on European imperialism is valid but only in regard to a world moral order existing either as a cosmic principle or a human institution. As a human institution, a world moral order presupposes a consensus of nations concerning certain principles of behaviour and above all the unconditionally binding force of such principles on the whole of humanity. On the basis of such an order, it will then be meaningful in respect of certain acts committed by one people against another, one race against another etc, to talk of just and unjust, moral or immoral. However in the 19th century when Europe conquered Africa and up until the middle of the 20th century when she colonised and exploited it, nothing resembling such an order existed. The UN, a post-war creation and the nearest approximation to such a concept, cannot in strict terms be said to embody a moral order for the reason that it operates mostly as one more power instrument of the big, mostly western, nations. Secondly, its decisions have very little or no binding force on anyone. Similarly, the existence of a world moral order as a cosmic force has never been proven. Indeed, according to Nietzsche, a world moral order in this latter sense was merely the invention of Christianity as part of a grand use of their slave revolt against the morality of the masters. But the real world in which men live, work, conquer others and make history is, according to Nietzsche, “will to power and nothing else besides”. In other words, the world of history floats above and beyond the moral order narrative. Life in this world operates,

...essentially, that is in its basic functions through injury, assault, exploitation, destruction and simply cannot be thought of at all without this character.”

To Nietzsche, calling any of these life functions just or unjust, moral or immoral in themselves will therefore be quite senseless given that,

...it is part of the concept of the living that it must grow — that must extend its power and consequently incorporates alien forces.10

Product of the ‘mute foundations’ of western reason, the doctrine of the will to power reveals that in all her historical experiences, Europe has always acted necessarily, i.e. in accordance with the basic drives that give meaning to her world, and with which she achieves growth and strength and which defines the most favourable conditions for her preservation and continuous growth. Consequently, at specific periods of her history, the slave trade, colonialism, imperialism, neo-colonialism, etc, became not accidental adventures, not chance games, not errors but fatalities of her will to power, i.e her will to expansion, growth and influence. Europe’s historical essence, her reason in history, is captured in her endless drive to increase her power by overcoming or seeking to overcome the rest of the world. Essential Europe is therefore nothing but the will to world-power.
Above all, she is nothing but precisely her world-power activities. Therefore, considered from the point of view of the will to power, as a mute foundation of western reason in modern history, Europe’s world-historical actions, notably colonialism, imperialism, etc, are merely actualisations of Europe’s essence, ie self-definition, in history — these are acts without which Europe as we know it today would not be Europe. Consequently, these acts, strictly speaking (on Europe’s term’s) lie outside the reach of any moral discourse — they are beyond good and evil, above blame and praise.

But if this is so, from whence come the near obsessive ideas of guilt and responsibility, injustice and immorality that have become indissociable from the Afrocentric interpretation of the West’s past and present encounters with Africa? Why didn’t we look at colonialism strictly as an encounter with a stronger power (ie, a different will to power) whom we had to fight because it wanted to assimilate us for its growth?

Paradoxically, the impetus and justification for a moralised reaction to Europe’s intervention in Africa came originally not from Africa but from Europe itself. European Christianity taught (perhaps unwittingly) the mission school educated Afrocentrics to interpret history in terms of a God-ordained world moral order that rigorously discriminates between good and evil, the guilty and the innocent, victims and executioners, etc. These reconditioned native minds were to turn this Christian/European moral-religious framework against colonialism (ie, against Europe itself) by viewing colonial conquest as a grave violation of the divine order of the world, in other words as a horrid crime against God and man.

Christian Europe therefore furnished the ground, the prototype and the vocabulary of the deeply ingrained moral idealism of the Afrocentric’s interpretation of European imperialism. In other words, such ideas as guilt, responsibility, crime, victim, etc, which until today constitute the overt or hidden infrastructure of the anti-West discourse of many Afrocentrics, derived originally not from the native’s reaction to Europe’s intervention in Africa, but from the Christian, moral breeding of the Afrocentrics. Evidence abounds that original native reaction to colonial conquest was virtually devoid of any European moral-religious idiosyncrasies.

However, whatever the origin of Africa’s moralisation on European world power deeds, Nietzsche’s power theory, it appears, had already underlined its efficacy in the historical arena. His fable of the lamb and the eagle graphically illustrates this. According to this fable, the eagle that devours a lamb acts in accordance with its essence as a bird of prey and not from a malicious will or intent to destroy the lamb:

Realizing that the wolf is going to devour it, the lamb cannot be aware that this negation of its person has an affirmative nature. The lamb perceives only the negative consequences for itself.\textsuperscript{12}

As Nietzsche points out, this reaction from the lamb is perfectly normal and understandable except for the inference from it, ie demanding that the eagle should behave like the lamb:

That lambs dislike great birds of prey does not seem strange: only it gives no ground for reproaching these birds of prey for bearing off little lambs. And if the lambs say among themselves “these birds of prey are evil, and whoever is least like a bird of prey, but rather its opposite, a lamb, would he not be good?” There is no reason to find fault with this institution of an ideal except perhaps that the birds of prey might view it a little ironically and say “we don’t dislike them all, these good little lambs, we even love them: nothing is more tasty than a tender little lamb”.\textsuperscript{13}

As we can see from the above passage, there is nothing wrong with the lamb wanting the eagle to behave like itself (the lamb) for it is in the power logic of lambness to conserve itself and seek more power just as it is in that of eagleness. The only problem with this position is that with regard to the power rationality of the eagle, it might be depressingly inefficacious.

When we translate this fable into the logic of Afrocentric critique of the West, we discover that it is by getting stuck to the logic of the lamb and refusing or being unable to examine the logic of the eagle that our Afrocentrics find unmitigated ground for conspiracy, guilt, responsibility or reparation theories. From such a position, the West comes out without attenuating circumstances and eternally as an evil pack of predators bent on devouring the gentle and innocent lambs of Africa.
However, from the Nietzschean power theory perspective, one can say that this kind of thinking is as it should be except for one thing, namely, any theories that seek to reproach Europe for being just that (ie, a predator) or that pass sentences of guilt and responsibility on it must first have to demonstrate that Europe had the choice not to engage in these predator-like deeds. Conversely, such a theory must also show that Africa’s pacifist, moralistic posture is also a matter of choice.

It would seem that such demonstrations are possible, according to Nietzsche, only if one is victim of the tricks of language or of morality, especially the Christian story of free will. For under the spell of grammar or the illusion of popular morality, one can reproach the West for its immoral eagle’s deeds and praise ourselves for having acted so morally, ie, for being lambs. However, such thinking has very little efficacy, since:

To demand of strength that it should not express itself as strength, that it should not be a desire to overcome; a desire to throw down, a desire to become master, a thirst for enemies and resistance and triumphs is just as absurd as to demand of weakness that it should express itself as strength.14

In other words, it is to demand that Europe, which was possessed of a superior technological, material and psychological strength, should not have acted as strong and superior at a particular point in time. That is, in the 19th century, it had the choice not to colonise us, as in the present day it could have refrained from neocolonising us. But to think so is, according to Nietzsche’s power theory, to be held captive by language or morality. Language separates action into subject and act, agent and activity and morality separates strength from expressions of strength, “…as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was free to express strength or not to do so”.15 But to him, “there is no such substratum; there is no being behind doing, effecting, becoming; the doer is merely a fiction added to the deed — the deed is everything”. In other words, essence, existence and activity are indissolubly the same. According to Nietzsche, it is this linguistic confusion and perhaps also the Christian story of free will that:

Vengefulness and hatred exploit for their own ends by believing that the strong man is free to be weak and the bird of prey to be a lamb. For this they gain the right to make the bird of prey accountable for being a bird of prey.16

Thus, as the theory goes, Europe had no choice not to be imperialistic at a particular time — in fact at all times — just as we had no choice not to fight colonialism at a particular period. To be imperialistic or anti-imperialistic are fatalities of historical becoming:

Aggressive and defensive egoisms are not matters of choice, to say nothing of free-will, but the fatality of life itself.17

That Europe now practices peace and the brotherhood of planetary democracy does not indicate that she has renounced imperialism or that she has abandoned her world power mission and will. She has merely set about the same mission, in a new setting, with different, perhaps more subtle weapons. In a post-imperial world, Europe’s will to world power has to form itself out of new materials, seek new detours, new cunning. It is as if, having concluded its world-conquering mission, Europe now finds itself in the position of an unemployed or retired conqueror who now craves peace and quiet probably so that he can enjoy the fruits of his conquests. But peace and quiet can only prevail if the rest of the world adopts the ways of the West. A democratised planet means a planet tailored to the West’s will to world leadership and subtle domination.

Conversely, Africa’s pacifist, moralistic posture is no proof of our being morally better or of our lack of will to power, but is, according to this theory, merely dictated by our weakness, ie, by our impotent will to power. That we did not set out to conquer Europe in revenge is not a matter of choice or of our higher moral standpoint. We had no choice in the matter. Our weakness, our material inferiority, dictates our ‘moral’, forgiving posture.18

What this power theory of European imperialism and neocolonialism seems to do is remove the ground beneath the feet of Afrocentric activist moralism — guilt-hunting, searching for reparations, etc — by showing that Africa’s ‘lamb morality’ and Europe’s ‘predatory eagleness’ are essentially the same, namely, actualisations of wills to power. The difference between the lamb’s will to power and
the eagle's is a difference only of degree (of power), not of essence or substance. In other words, because Africa lacks strength, the will to power of the Afrocentric is turned inward and drawn into becoming reactive. On a Nietzschean account, all the Afrocentric diatribe of a Cheik Anta Diop, or the impassioned anti-West declamations of a Chinweizu would be no more than the expression of this impotent, reactive will to power.

Now whether we approve or not of this power theory of European history does not appear to matter for it appears to be preprogrammed in a seemingly bio-cultural or civilizational way, not to seek approval, i.e. to ignore non-approval. However, in spite of its seemingly over-weening cynicism, this theory seems to have this advantage over most hitherto interpretations. It can provide an answer to the question, why has Europe, despite the endless flow of accusations, denunciation and lamentations from Africa, never at any moment regretted or deplored its past and present deeds in Africa? Why has it not, in reaction to our ceaseless litany of woes and jeremiads, felt a mighty sting of conscience, an irrepressible feeling of guilt, a thousand-fold shudder and shock such that it will not rest until it has tendered a world-historical apology to Africa and to humanity? From the perspective of a Nietzschean power theory, the reason seems to be very simple indeed: there is absolutely nothing to regret, nothing to apologise for. According to Nietzsche, there is simply no room for such depressive feelings like regret or repentance in the psyche of the real operators of European world historical actions. How do these regard their past deeds? Nietzsche gave us a clue through his study of the ways of the Greek aristocratic conquerors to whom the modern-day technocrats of Europe's world power are civilizational heirs. At best, says Nietzsche, they might express some wonder if the event in retrospect appears strange: "Here something has unexpectedly gone wrong". But they will not say, "I ought not to have done that". In other words, they look back to their past adventures and world-conquering mission with that stout-hearted fatalism and free conscience with which, according to Nietzsche, strong peoples and proud nations have always digested and assimilated their past. This would suggest that only weaklings are left to mourn dejectedly and eternally over their own or other people's alleged 'mis-deeds'.

Consequently, based on this Nietzschean gloss, one can say that it is not to the real operators of western world-historical action that our Afrocentrics should go with their 'grand narratives' of guilt, responsibility and reparation, for, like the state forming, artist-conquerors of old, of whom they are heirs.

They do not know what guilt, responsibility or consideration are, these born organisers; they exemplify that terrible artist's egoism that has the look of bronze and knows itself justified to all eternity in its works, like a mother in her child.20

Here, Nietzsche's unmasking bluntness becomes significant, appearing to shed more light on what today is often staged as Europe's self-criticisms, i.e. the denunciations, by some Europeans, of certain past or present activities of Europe in Africa. Do these amount to a recognition of guilt or are they merely sublimations of Europe's internal problems? We notice first of all that no such criticisms or self-criticisms, ever emanate from the real operators, the hardly visible technocratic élite (those charged to plot and execute Europe's world-power destiny). But suppose any such self-critical gesture emanates from the political class, it certainly does not amount to a recognition of guilt or responsibility; it is most likely a political rhetoric motivated simply by world-power systemic imperatives: the need to pacify complainers so as to ensure a conducive environment for the optimal functioning of Europe's world-power systems. It is the same pacification imperative that seems to govern the politics of development aids and grants. Similarly, if one day Europe decides to accede to the Afrocentric demands for reparation, it will most likely do so in response to the selfsame world-power systemic imperatives. It will be one example more of the thousand-fold craftiness of Europe's post-imperial power practices. To be sure, there is no shortage of western Africanists, intellectuals or activists who indulge in severe critique of Europe's imperialism in Africa, or who even participate in certain forms of anti-West struggles on the continent. However, many of such blasé intellectuals are bereft of any real power and as such their gestures may not amount to much. But granted that these gestures are well-meaning, it would seem to us that any 'penitential Africanism' coming from a European intellectual should be seen not really
as a penance for European imperialism, but most probably as a sublimated response to the internal politics of the present post-material, postmodern disgust in Europe. In any case, given the imperialistic over-determination of the essentials of modern European history and of the modern European identity, any postcolonial tears shed by a European, even with the best will in the world, could really only amount to crocodile tears.

But whether as crocodile tears or as hypocritical masks, Europe’s present post-imperial gestures may not survive the unmasking torch of a Nietzschean deconstruction. For behind these little masks of goodness and post-imperial decency, lurks the same implacable will to power sublimated into the will to dominate through cunning and subterfuge, etc.

Now what Nietzsche said in such ornate terms, and with so much pathos, about the ways of the essential West has been put in an infinitely more blunt and terse language appropriate to the tempo of our age. Postmodernism is the name for this highly desublimated Nietzschean. Thus when Lyotard announces that postmodernism means the abolition of master-narratives, what he most likely means to say is that all the self-deceptive masks behind which Europe hid to execute her will to world-power have been deliberately thrown off and that people can now have a de-bewitched peep at the inner workings of Europe’s power constructions. A visit to Lyotard’s ‘deconstruction sites’ of western power in postmodernity will most certainly enable us to further shed light on how Africa, and a few other Third World peoples, continue to misunderstand the West.

Based on Lyotard’s account of postmodernism, Africa’s misunderstanding of Europe can be explained in terms of a ‘mixing of tongues’. For the African radical critic of Europe, a mixing of tongues takes the following form. The African radical thinker criticises the West; denounces its imperialist strangle-hold on Africa, its violent and unjust exploitation of its peoples and resources. But to articulate these denunciations, he has recourse to concepts, notions and ideals drawn from Europe’s humanistic discourse of legitimation. Such ideas include emancipation, truth, good and bad, right and wrong, etc. Conditioned by his mission-school training to take very seriously the idea of a moral world order, he unsuspectingly casts his critique of Europe in the metaphors of Europe’s humanistic, moral idealism. But unknown to the Afrocentric critic, western rationality had undergone a major self-mutation; Europe had undertaken a paradigm shift in her discourse of legitimation. She had abandoned the perspective of mind, the tradition of thought from which humanistic idealism meant anything other than a museum of grand fanciful stories, ie, in Lyotard’s idiom, ‘master narratives’. It had returned to a Nietzschean “innocence of becoming”, having like Nietzsche himself “banished and extinguished the concepts of guilt and punishment from the world”. More specifically, among the elements of this radical shift in Europe’s self-understanding in the postmodern era, Skirman has listed the following: 1) abolishing the primacy of teleology in action; 2) abolishing the primacy of responsibility in the legitimation of action; 3) disinterest in the future of mankind.

Indeed instrumentalist, western rationality, since the 19th century, had ceased to legitimate and self-legitimate by recourse to humanistic master narratives like Truth, Justice, etc. Rather, it had become the discourse of modern power, ie, according to Lyotard, the discourse of legitimation by success, efficiency and performativity. Hegel was diagnosing this paradigm shift in the 19th century when he declared “what is effective is rational” and “the conquerors are right for they embody the progress of humanity”. Nietzsche admitted with glee this casting away of humanistic moral idealism out of his epoch. “If anything can reconcile us to our age, it is the great amount of immorality it can permit itself without thinking any the worse of itself”. Meanwhile, only from the perspective of legitimation by master narrative could Europe’s actions — colonialism, capitalist explanation, and so on — be seen to be wrong, unjust or evil. But if, since the 19th century, in the imperialist era, legitimation by grand narratives had lost its force, or had simply disappeared, then a critique of colonialism in the past or neo-colonialist in the present carried out in the perspective of grand narratives (truth, wrong and right) not only ceases to be pertinent but misses its mark. This much, Lyotard’s postmodern de-legitimations seem to have made abundantly clear. Furthermore, his diagnosis has revealed that advanced western industrial societies are ruled by the imperative of a systems rationality whereby legitimation and pertinence are
achieved solely by the criteria of success, performativity and efficiency of systems. Our contention is that this state of affairs — the systemic logic of legitimation by efficiency, power and success — was already in operation, had already been reached in the days of imperialism. The imperial capitalist economic system which to many was the prime mover, was already operating according to a systemic rationality. According to Lyotard, in a context of technocratic rationality, power (measured in terms of performativity, efficiency and success), by increasing one’s capacity to administer proofs, increases the capacity for being right.25 This is a direct replication of the colonial conquerors’ maxim: Whatever happens, we’ve got the maxim-gun and they have not.

Consequently, the question of Europe’s actions in Africa has never been an ethical one: the question was not whether it was right or wrong, just or unjust, to colonise or exploit; it has been a technocratic power problem. Can it be done, how and to what power effects? To repropose the West with immorality or injustice therefore, on this account, amounts to mixing mutually exclusive tongues: grand narratives and the technocratic discourse of power and systems.

A good illustration of this mixing of tongues is furnished by the reception of Third World intellectuals to Huntington’s recent thesis regarding the civilisational origin of post-cold-war conflicts and of third-world ‘occidental-phobia’.26 Many Third-World intellectuals have felt compelled to denounce and refute what to them sounds like a civilisational Calvinism: civilisation overdetermines a people’s receptivity or imperviousness to certain cherished western values such as democracy, peace, tolerance, freemarket. Most of the refutations take the form of scholarly researches destined to prove Huntington wrong. But supposing Huntington’s thesis is displaced from the grand scholarly, metanarrativistic tradition, to the postmodern plane, then the need to ‘refute’ Huntington’s thesis may not arise, or arises out of a misunderstanding. From the postmodern angle, what Huntington is saying about the rationality of post-cold war conflicts is not meant to reflect a ‘correct’ state of affairs in the world; it is the metaphor for a new world-power strategy, a rhetorical figure chosen for its strong performative charge in the multi-power context of a post-cold war world. On that score, it is neither ‘true’ nor ‘false’; its value lies in what it can enable the West to achieve, eg new policy shifts against certain parts of the globe. Therefore, conducting a scholarly refutation of Huntington’s thesis is missing the point, misunderstanding the ways of the postmodern, post-imperial West.

In the specific case of the Afrocentric radical discourse on the West, misunderstanding appears to inform the politics of anti-westernism at its very roots. As we have already seen, the anti-imperialist Afrocentric set out to judge Europe’s historical self-affirmations solely by the adverse effects which the means (colonisation, exploitation) used to achieve such self-affirmations have had upon us. But the error in this was that instead of looking for a drive, a purpose that explains the necessity for such means, the Afrocentric presupposed in advance, the universal validity of a ‘lamb’s moralism’ that condemns them. Apparently deceived by the official but dead humanist tongue of the West, he proceeded to use this lamb’s moralism as the universal norm on the basis of which he perpetually denounces Europe’s actions in Africa. The problem with this approach was the result: all the anti-imperialist missiles launched from the Afrocentric position seem to have always landed in the desert area of Europe’s mind. In other words, the angry voice of Afrocentric anti-imperialist radicals appears to have always sounded in Europe like the voice of one crying in the wilderness.

CONCLUSION

By exposing the grounds for the opacity of Afrocentric counter-West discourse vis-à-vis its target, we are not in any way holding brief for western imperialism. We are concerned with analysing the meta-theoretical roots of the intellectual/political inefficacy of current anti-imperialist discourses in Africa. By opening up the power-driven cultural matrix of western imperial rationality on the one hand, and deconstructing the moral-idealist infrastructure of the Afrocentric anti-imperialist argument on the other hand, we tried to show why Afrocentric anti-imperialist radicalism failed to convince Europe of her historical/moral guilt against Africa. However, the failure of current Afrocentric counter-West discourse does not imply that there is no theoretic room left for a more effective African counter-discourse to western imperialism,
especially in its postmodern guises. On the contrary such a discourse is not only feasible but necessary. But for that to be possible, some rethinking based upon our analysis of our traditional Afrocentric paradigms becomes necessary.

The lens through which the Afrocentric critic views Europe is still largely a moral-humanistic one (which he acquired from his mission school days). Hence his constant preoccupation with grand theorising: whether colonialism was justifiable, how Europe underdeveloped Africa, Europe’s moral debt to Africa, etc. (One wonders whether such heroic undertakings still have any relevance to the pressing task of appropriating the tools of science, technology, capitalism and perhaps democracy to advance Africa’s positioning in the modern world.) But Europe, through its postmodernist minds, has expressly informed us that it has renounced belief in the ideals and rhetoric of moral-humanistic culture; it has abolished its grand narratives. What it is saying is that the language of guilt, responsibility, truth, is foreign to today’s operators of the world-power destiny. These, notably the foreign policy élite, the military strategists, the transnational capitalists, are schooled solely in the lexicon of power, success, efficiency and performativity. Now, insensitivity to this paradigm shift in Europe’s self-representation, or failure to take it seriously enough, need not constitute a serious weakness in African or Third-World scholarship. We are after all not obligated to agree with every coquetry of postmodern Europe, much less to follow it along its decadence slope. Still, failure to take it seriously at its word may constitute a barrier to hitting at our target. We may be thinking that we are still striking at the West when in fact we may be boxing a straw West entirely of our making.

If we have absorbed Nietzsche’s insight that Europe’s actions on the world arena are self-legitimating affirmations of her will to power in history, then the lesson of postmodernity should be that moral denunciatory discourse has no effect on Europe’s world power drive, given that it is a ‘natural phenomenon’, ie a ‘biocultural’ urge beyond praise or blame. All one can say is: that is the way the West is. This means that what is left for the Rest is to work out counter-measures to prevent or limit the damage on us of the West’s will to power. One way in which we can turn such knowledge of the West to our advantage is to come to terms with it by first taking it seriously. If, for instance, Europe says that the name of her game is ‘power’ or ‘systems rationality’ or ‘civilisation’, it serves little purpose for an African or Third World intellectual to say or show that it is not so, or that she is wrong to say that it is. The implication of denouncing Europe’s self-representations as false or dangerous is that we possess knowledge of what the truth is or should be. But the essential West shares no such moral optimism regarding the ‘truth’. What the West says is that he who has power, success, performativity and efficiency automatically possesses truth. The African or Third World thinker who denounces this as dangerous cynicism or amoralism is merely voicing his preference for a West that should be different from what it actually is. Such idealism may be heroic, but it cannot solve our problem. The question is, in what ways can we turn these postmodernist insights to our advantage? Firstly, by unlearning to take Africa’s conspiracy theories or Europe’s liberal-humanistic rhetoric too seriously. Secondly, by learning to take on the West on its own terms. Taking on the West on its own postmodernist terms does not necessarily amount to capitulating before imperialism; it is perhaps tackling imperialism head-on by using or feigning to use its metaphors in order to deconstruct it from within and achieve thematic control over it. Such thematic control will not constitute any serious harm to western power. But for an African critic, it makes the difference between crying in the desert and arguing with the West.

Notes
2 See Walter Rodney’s anti-imperialist book, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa.
3 Chinweizu, The West and the Rest of Us, op cit, p xxiii.
7 Chinweizu, op cit, p 23.
8 Towa Marcian, L’idée d’une philosophie negro-africaine, Editions CLE, Yaoundé, 1979, p 54.
9 Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals, New York, p 76.
10 Nietzsche, The Will to Power, op cit, p 386.
11 Two historical novels, Things Fall Apart and Ambiguous Adventure, contain useful details on the way the authentic natives interpreted colonial conquest. In the first, the ‘unmoralised’ reaction to the white man’s intrusion is illustrated by Okonkwo’s decision to fight it on the ground that it was an alien encroachment on the community’s power and its gods. Obviously the proud, slave-selling, tribe-conquering pagans could not have imagined that colonial conquest was a ‘sin’ or a crime against humanity. Similarly in Ambiguous Adventure, the most influential character called the Grande Royale was quick to divine, behind the rapidity of the conqueror’s victory, the morality-free force that drives world history. To her, the conqueror’s easy and total victory amounted to “l’art de vaincre sans avoir raison”. In other words, if the colonialists won, it was because they had power and not rightness on their side. Therefore she sent her cousin to Europe to acquire this “secret of winning without being right”. This was a clear intuition of world history as the arena for the implacable clash of powers.
13 Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals, op cit, p 44.
14 Ibid, p 45.

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