By Our Own Hands and by Theirs: Africans and the Nervousness to Belong

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The history of colonization, including forms of endogenous wars of conquests such as the 19th century *Mfecane* in southern Africa or the Islamic jihad led by Uthman dan Fodio in northern Nigeria forced people of those regions to renegotiate their identity to survive and created, within them a nervousness of being accepted and belonging. As one's own identity is ostracized, it can become common to interiorize this violence and redirect it against other Africans who are now the stereotyped out-group. Such lateral violence has birthed an intractable identity crisis that has erupted in unimaginable violence to self, other, and society.

"Where are you from?" is a common question posed by Africans to their fellow citizens. As innocent as this question appears, it is, of course, a product of colonization, achieved through the forceful and expedient border arrangements forged by the colonizers for their own prosperity. The same arrangement has continued to function as it was conceived in the beginning. Africans, rather than reclaiming their own references to identify each other as members of a people, without obfuscating their uniqueness, rely on imposed names and borders that effectively divided ethno-cultural groups, resulting in present-day conflicts. Franz Fanon blames this burdensome inheritance in the postcolony on the pitfalls of national consciousness. He argues thus:

National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people…will be in any case only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been.

The proliferation of platforms for self-determination or secessionist campaigns in the postcolony is not unrelated to the physical and structural violence associated with this travesty of national consciousness. If "being oppressed means the absence of choices" as bell hooks argues, then it can be said that oppressed Africans have constructed, since colonization, psychological and physical barriers hinged on a normalized hatred, underappreciation and dismissal of their own capacities and worth. These physical borders have coalesced with the psychological to wreak devastating havoc on socio-political relations in the continent.

In South Africa, as with Nigeria, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, South Sudan, and so on, the nervousness of belonging has percolated national and everyday politics in the form of xenophobic attacks and affirmative action that alienate the relatively vulnerable "foreigner"- usually one that is not White. Indeed, Black African foreigners bearing the brunt of xenophobic attacks highlights deep-rooted Afrophobia. Rather than questioning the root of that phenomenon, lateral violence has instead become the go-to answer: attacking those who have been historically marginalized and dehumanized to position one-self as superior and "different" from the alleged "job-stealer, disease-spreader African".

Whether we label those reactions as nonsensical, puzzling or concerning, they all point to the absence of a shared African identity. Sadly it appears that questioning the legacy of anti-African bias, inter-African violence and the very social hierarchy that rewards those closer to former colonists and overlooks "natives", is a road too seldom travelled and less attractive than resorting to senseless violence.

Xenophobia, in all its ramifications, mirrors the tragedy of the crisis of belonging. It shows the barbarity that comes when Africans are more concerned with appearing "less Africans" than others. Thus, it can only be described as the

dehumanization of Africans by Africans, a self-eradication that can't possibly be beneficial. Once again, Africans have effectively become the colonizers.

This is further evidenced as the structures of the so-called postcolonial state are geared toward the extirpation of the "other", instead of challenging othering in the first place, particularly in societies that have historically been divided and engineered on the very premise of othering. Acts of cruelty that accompany the treatments of so-called "strangers", "foreigners", or "visitors" in many African societies have all the lineaments of the twentieth-century wars, where those castigated as outsiders were treated as "members of an inferior and indeed malignant species". Structures of difference in Africa have been created to maintain a hierarchy in which those in powerful positions continue to access the best schools, degree programs, and basic resources, while undermining the legitimate rights and existence of others. This situation lends weight to what Ali Mazrui calls the conflict of "who is who". The conflict represents the "tribalized" fractious nature of the postcolonial state, which still bears the bitter fruits of its colonial past.

With biological social markers such as skin colour or ethnic identity that result in ostracization wherever one is, racial trauma will manifest itself even in mundane health indicators.
Furthermore, when history books, laws and the media depict Black people as inferior, dangerous, invisible or when kids' books prefer depicting non-human characters instead of a "Black" one, 1 of 2 things can happen: learning to despise oneself or actively desiring to fit into the dominant social group. Both alternatives crystallize the nervousness of wanting to belong and never being accepted.

Africans or those for whom the "black" insignia has been appended on their identity in the diaspora are not spared this nervousness of belonging. Whoopi Goldberg exclaims after Barack Obama became President in 2008 that: "I always thought of myself as an American, with all of the promise that America holds. But suddenly last night I felt like I could put my suitcase down…finally." Many African Americans heralded Obama's administration as the closure they needed to finally call the United States home and live the American dream. Yet, since the euphoria that greeted Obama's emergence as the first "black" President fizzled out, they were once again reminded of the premise of this country. The tiniest glimpse of light was immediately followed by the Presidency of the "first White president" and an increase of white supremacist terrorists attacks in the US. These are not coincidences; these are calls to arms to reclaim what is seen as a de facto White country.

The case of Christian Cooper, the "Black" birder in Central Park, and Amy Cooper, the "White" lady with the leashed dog, springs to mind. It is an all too familiar case for many a Black person whose only crime is to exist in white spaces. Amy Cooper is only a symbol of whiteness: a system of power that is bent on tasking White people to distribute and deny non-White individuals their right as they see fit by discrediting their character, intentions, or personhood.

On that infamous day, Amy Cooper firmly set herself to benefit from this system of power that designates and criminalizes "black" people for being "black". She explicitly communicated her intention to display the power of her whiteness by punishing a "Black" man who dared to question her. History has repeatedly shown that "White" women can weaponize black skin – specifically that of Black men- without fearing any repercussions. Thus she told the police a grotesque lie that she and her dog were being threatened by "a man, African-American." Christian Cooper knew that his "blackness" alone discredited him to question the actions of a "white woman" in a "white space" which is likely why he anticipated that a recording would come in handy.

This example illustrates that to be black is to live with and anticipate the "specter of violence" that can unleash only because of one's black skin. It is to be judged guilty because of your skin, figuratively and legally. It is a life-long questioning about one's true identity outside of the relentlessness and insidiousness of racism. It is to live in a "nervous condition".

In a conversation with a Caribbean woman, the first author was introduced into the nervousness of her belonging.

Ben: Where would you say you belong?

Woman: My homeland. But I am afraid to go there due to the violence and a lack of a sense of self. We have lost our ties to our ancestry and have no connection to an Indigenous language. That part of us is gone. But you are visible when you have a lighter skin. When I look at Africans, the way they move, speak about their origin with a sense of pride, I feel impressed and would like to visit. But I am also afraid.

Ben: You think Africans in Africa are in a much better place?

Woman: Yes, the way you have your language. That is yours. You created it. The beauty of the women: The strong beautiful Zulu woman or the graciousness of the Maasai. The cultural antiques, attires, and so on. There are pieces of my culture I can never teach my children. I am not romanticizing Africa. But here in Canada, I speak English, but I am forever being corrected because of the shade of my skin. My English is the same as the white person, but my colour tells the onlooker that English is not mine. As descendants of slaves, we long for the journey home but we fear it. I crave the feel of what Swahili sounds. I like the clicking of the Zulu language. But I have none of that. I don't have the language to express myself. So, I am forever an outsider. It's hard. When African people talk about their ancestry, I talk about slavery.

This discussion went on and became painful as both participants dived deeper. It was especially painful when the woman spoke about Africa as a place that knows itself and glorifies its people. It was painful because this reality is slipping away. The African identity slips away when we, Africans, only know how to look at what is ours from a colonial vantage point.

Jean Paul Sartre used the notion of nervous condition in the preface of the Wretched of the Earth to evoke "the "disassociated self" created by colonialism. This nervousness has outlived the Europeans on the continent. Africans have become obsessed not with the often diasporic burden of "blackness" (although colorism is present), but with the notions of individual power – whether social or economic – and "tribe". We have used these "tribal" identities to reproduce the same specter of violence and discrimination as a way of protecting "native custom".

While "tribal" identities may seem permanent, Mahmood Mamdani argues that they should be treated as malleable historical constructs, which could be denaturalized in social and political relations. To do this, he insists we must think beyond the concept of a nation-state that categorizes people into permanent minorities, settlers, or immigrants. He says we must begin to realize how we are all wounded or colonized by the system and regard ourselves more as survivors with a new opportunity to find a unifying agenda and sense of purpose that would assuage the anxieties and fears we so deeply feel about each other.

We are hardwired to belong to something, to a place we can call home. A belonging, as Douglas Alexander argues, that is far more "primal than our politics today suggests". We must move beyond partisanship and forge a truly inclusive place on our own terms where Africans can finally belong, exist without being erased and feel at home, alongside other oppressed people also seeking to reclaim their identity.

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