Reflections on Identity in Four African Cities

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CHAPTER 12

What is an African?
Narratives from urban South Africa, Gabon and Togo

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12.1 Introduction: The debate over an African identity

While Western media and popular culture continue to represent Africa and its people ‘in tantalising tarzanic and essentialist terms’ (Nyamnjoh, 2000: 9), constantly reasserting the ‘fevered imaginings’ that underpinned the so-called civilising mission of colonial powers, as Pottier (2003) puts it, the notion of an African identity has initiated vigorous debate among African scholars over the past decade.

Most critical debate comes from a ‘a younger generation of “postmodern” scholars’ (Robins, 1994: 18) who contend that the idea of an overarching and unproblematicised African identity is simply a discursive strategy, an ‘empty myth’ initiated by post-independence elites in their search for a unified approach to the struggle against colonialism and for African development. What those Africanist intellectuals loyal to this struggle fail to represent is the multiplicity and hybridity of identities constructed by those who live on the continent. According to Sewpaul, such a discourse constitutes ‘the substitution of one hegemonic discourse, that of Eurocentrism, with another hegemonic discourse, Afrocentrism’, which ‘continues modernism’s binary classifications’ (2004: 1–2). For Mbembe, this representation of Africa and its inhabitants is advanced by two narratives that are implicitly rooted in the ideologies of Marxism and of nationalism in Africa during the last century. The first, nativism, emerges from ‘the malaise resulting from the encounter between the West and the indigenous worlds’ and ‘proposes a return to an ontological and mythical “Africanness” in which the African subject might once again say “I” and express him- or herself in his or her own name’ (Mbembe, 2002b: 629). This narrative of cultural uniqueness serves to legitimise policies of ‘authenticity’ in various African countries and to promote the search for an endogenous knowledge, ‘an African interpretation of things’. The second of
these two narratives, that of *afro-radicalism*, stems from a ‘reified vision of history’ whereby ‘the present destiny of the continent is supposed to proceed not from free and autonomous choices but from the legacy (both) of a history imposed upon the Africans and of [current] economic conditionalities’ (Mbembe, 2002a: 243). Mbembe argues that both narratives ignore African agency and require ‘a profound investment in the idea of race’ since they are ‘discourses of inversion’, drawing ‘their fundamental categories from the myths they claim to oppose’, in particular ‘the very conviction that race exists and is at the foundation of morality and nationality’ (2002a: 257).

The main criticism directed at this notion of an homogeneous African identity is accordingly that it is conceived in primordial and essentialist terms, leading scholars to ignore ‘the enormous differences within Africa and amongst Africans that inhabit the continent; differences that express themselves along the lines of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, religion, language, region, nationality, and so on’ (Robins, 2004: 24). ‘Postmodern’ scholars call for a re-evaluation of theories based on economic dependence and cultural determinism and for a recognition of African individuality and agency as Africans express themselves differently in various post-colonial societies. These scholars draw attention to the ‘contemporary everyday practices through which Africans manage to recognize and maintain with the world an unprecedented familiarity’ (Mbembe, 2002a: 258).

Notions of subjectivity, autonomy, and agency are at the core of social science debates on identity formation in late modernity. However, this conception of identity as the product of free will and individual choice remains contested. While the primordial and essentialist approach to the study of identities has generally been discarded, many scholars highlight the structural-material determinants within which identity choices are made. In the African context, Nyamnjoh argues that

the causes of Africa’s problems are neither simply external, nor exclusively internal, but a combination of both. Africans have been, and still are, both dependent and autonomous agents in relation to the historical forces that have impinged, and are impinging, upon them and their continent. While it would be too simplistic to see Africans entirely as zombies totally overwhelmed by external forces, one must also be careful not to credit them with utopian agency, which is certainly not feasible within the current structures and relations of unequal exchange championed by the giant compressors of the West. (Nyamnjoh, 2000: 18)

Sindjoun highlights broader cultural discourses within which identity formation takes place. He argues that popular narratives often parallel those of the elite, in a process of the internalisation of official narratives:
By focusing exclusively on the fluidity of identities and on popular (urban) practices, the post-modern discourse partially ignores official narratives ... The 'official' nature of these narratives should not lead to their disposal as if popular narratives and practices had a monopoly of legitimacy ... The myth of a united Africa is not only an issue for elites. A Pan-African identity manifests itself in the daily lives of Africans through music, sport and beauty pageants ... (Sindjoun, 2002: 16–19, my translation)

Finally, Sichone points out that recognition of the multiplicity of identities that Africans create for themselves in their daily lives does not preclude the emergence of a common 'Africanness'. '(A)fricanisation is something that happens to everyone at some time ... In identity politics, the question who is an African is clearly incomplete (even meaningless) unless one also asks: when is one an African? Why and How?' (2004: 15). Sichone argues that such an identity emerges primarily in connection with Europe: 'One is never actually African but becomes Africanised under specific circumstances ... Being African is ... rarely a term of local value but is rather best understood as a global term that exists in juxtaposition to Europe' (Sichone, 2004: 1).

12.2 The debate within South Africa

Over the past decade in South Africa, the notion of an African identity has also been vigorously debated. The debate moreover has been indelibly coloured by the idea of South African exceptionalism. Mamdani, when at the University of Cape Town in the late 1990s, launched a debate on the teaching of African history at South African universities. A dominant narrative, Mamdani claimed, is that Africa is not defined as the whole continent – North Africa is depicted as part of the Middle East, and South Africa as an island of civilisation, as an exception.

[We] have to take head-on the notion of South African exceptionalism and the widely shared prejudice that while South Africa is a part of Africa geographically, it is not quite culturally and politically, and certainly not economically. It is a point of view that I have found to be a hallmark of much of the South African intelligentsia, shared across divides: white or black, left or right, male or female. (Mamdani, 1998)

This exceptionalism undoubtedly echoes the apartheid myth that 'white South Africa was a big Orania built in isolation without any contribution from the rest of the continent ... [that] even though the majority of South Africans are black Africans, the country itself was not part of Black (sub-Saharan) Africa' (Sichone, 2004: 9).
Simultaneously, after apartheid, as South Africa emerged as a legitimate actor on both African and international fora, the ‘Africanisation’ of the country became a fundamental element in the South African state’s policy and projected foreign image. This underpins both Mandela’s declaration in 1993 that South Africa ‘could not escape its African destiny’ (Hendricks & Whiteman, 2004) and Mbeki’s well-known 1996 ‘I am an African’ speech at the adoption by the Constitutional Assembly of the new South African Constitution. This is also the cornerstone of the African Renaissance project initiated by Mbeki, a project aimed at political, economic, and cultural renewal of the continent as it enters the twenty-first century.

These two narratives of exceptionalism and of an African renaissance have fuelled the identity debate in South Africa. Some view the debate as emancipatory since it will launch a process of re-appropriation by Africans of self-authorship after centuries of imposed representation, as well as the promotion of an Afrocentric scholarship. These views, in turn, have elicited the criticism that the debate introduces a new form of essentialism and accordingly that this has not transcended the hoary issue of race, thereby reasserting patterns of inclusion and exclusion in post-apartheid South Africa that are antithetical to the democratic ideal (Sewpaul, 2004). Further criticism holds that the debate is confined to the elite and is a strategy aimed at deflecting attention from prominent cleavages in social grouping and gender. It has also been described as a state-legitimising discourse and a political strategy aimed at attracting ‘the Africanist’ section of South African voters (Crouzel, 2000). The African Renaissance concept, moreover, has been interpreted as a strategy to promote South Africa’s national interests (rather than those of the African continent) and to legitimize South Africa’s claims to continental leadership.

The notion of African identity – both within South Africa and elsewhere on the continent – is contested since it comprises different, and sometimes contradictory, definitions. It is clear that more is at stake than mere theoretical lucidity. The notion is caught between ‘the desire to know and to think and the urge to act’ to quote Mbembe (2002b: 636) as much analysis struggles to differentiate between what the identities of Africans are and what they should be for action and redress to take place. Further difficulties stem from the paucity of empirical evidence to back up theoretical analysis.

12.3 How do urban residents in South Africa, in Gabon, and in Togo construct ‘Africa’?

This section presents qualitative evidence gathered in three African countries, South Africa, Gabon, and Togo – countries that arguably belong to different ‘Africas’.
South Africa is widely accepted as the regional hegemon of Southern Africa and as a key economic, demographic, and military power on the continent. It represents 25 per cent of African GNP and 40 per cent of continental industrial output. Gabon and Togo are two small Francophone countries, located geographically in Central Africa and in West Africa respectively. Exploitation of oil reserves in Gabon guarantees interest in the country both internationally and by France, whereas Togo is one of Africa’s poorer countries.

The qualitative evidence was assembled by convening focus groups in a series of residential neighbourhoods in the cities of Cape Town, Johannesburg, Libreville, and Lomé. Each focus group was requested to discuss how they ‘felt’ about their own country, about South Africa (or in the cases of Cape Town and Johannesburg, about Francophone Africa) and about the African continent. Discussions were conducted in the preferred language of each group and transcriptions were subsequently translated into English for analysis. The three research prompts and subsequent non-directive facilitation of discussion were deliberately chosen to enable groups freely to probe areas of shared meaning. Since focus groups were not asked to debate issues directly related to a specific topic, identification and discussion of narratives produced evidence of shared sentiments regarding their importance. While recognising that the researcher influences focus group narratives, they take place in a socio-cultural context that is at least partly revealed through their content. This work is accordingly synchronic rather than historical, and is exploratory rather than quantifiable and generalisable. In short, this chapter merely hopes to shed some light on the various ways in which Africa is conceptualised and given meaning in very different African urban contexts.

(References for quotes in the text follow the convention used in chapters 8 and 9 in this book. More information on the focus groups is given in tabular form in appendix A to this chapter).

**Narratives from South Africa (Cape Town and Johannesburg)**

The president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, once made the statement that ‘South Africans (are) ignorant of the continent’s great civilisations and reputable centres of learning … and (have) an unwarranted superiority complex with regard to their peers’ (2003). Narratives gathered during this research seem to confirm that South Africans from all economic and ethno-racial backgrounds display scant knowledge of Africa. Francophone Africa in particular appears in the minds of South Africans either as a nonentity or as something still ‘under construction.’ Unsurprisingly, narratives on Africa focus on contiguous countries and especially on Zimbabwe, a country that has figured at the forefront of news reports in South Africa recently. Very often, representations of Africa in the minds of South Africans
are deeply negative and expressed in a derogatory manner. Perceptions are based on a number of prejudices and stereotypes that seem to echo Conrad’s 'Heart of Darkness'. Images of a continent in disarray dominate, and key words in these narratives are 'diseases', 'uneducated', 'hunger and starvation', 'unsafe', 'corruption and political instability', and 'natural problems'. 'Africa' in sum often emerges as the polar opposite of what South Africa should be striving for both politically and economically. Such negative perceptions are captured in the following extract:

All you see is what you get through the television in the newspapers, and it is wars and crime and poverty; disease and money laundering. And dirty. So my perception is Africa … they are the rest of the continent. I don’t want to be part of that. I am not really interested. (Strand, Cape Town)

Sentiments of separation and of distance from 'Africa' were both widespread and openly expressed by all South Africans represented in focus groups, irrespective of class or colour. Being part of the continent is conceived as a geographical accident, and lends credence to Sepaul’s findings among students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal:

Africa, from the students’ responses, emerges as two worlds juxtaposed – one that they hold in their heads, an Africa with all its archetypal representations, and an Africa that they actually inhabit … a world of denim jeans, cellphones, TV, computers and concrete buildings. (Sepaul, 2004: 8)

It is apparent that narratives on Africa are deeply influenced by a shared belief in South African exceptionalism. This belief is rooted in South Africa’s perceived economic and political advantages in Africa, in the conviction that ‘South Africa is hope for Africa’ in the words of a Kayamandi resident in Stellenbosch. This belief often translates into a conviction that ‘what is good for South Africa is good for the rest of Africa’, thereby revealing paternalism and sometimes condescension:

I have read in Sunday newspapers that there is a huge expansion going on from South Africa in Tanzania. For example, Game has opened there, and Telkom is there, and we deliver electricity and stuff like that. So I don’t feel threatened by Africa, because I feel that if it was not for us, then nothing will go on in Africa. (Roodeport 2, Johannesburg)

Conversely, South Africa’s location in Southern Africa is seen, particularly by middle-income focus group respondents, as disadvantageous to the economy of the country. Proximity to countries that are politically unstable is said to discourage
foreign investments. Implicitly, this view proposes a policy of isolationism:

Look for instance at the service delivery; it’s very bad compared to other countries. We are not progressing fast enough. It’s because we are part of the SADC region and we are dependent on what’s happening there. We are part of a contingent group. If something is happening in Zimbabwe, we have a problem here. We have to become more independent … (Mayfair, Johannesburg)

Yes, we want to see our country succeed with people coming here with a degree of confidence, and saying this is a good pick. But there is always this negative perception which is blown up. Why when something happens in Zimbabwe, or Nigeria which is far away from us, do we get affected? That is the worrying thing about the international community, the way they perceive South Africa or don’t know South Africa. We’re always portrayed as this banana republic, you know. It’s a misrepresentation of our country. (Fleurhof, Johannesburg)

A belief in exceptionalism and an evasion of identification with Africa are rationalised through two narratives, both clearly instrumental in nature: the first focuses on the government’s policy towards Africa and the second on South Africa’s immigration policy. Though aware of government’s ‘African Renaissance’ concept, of its economic initiatives on the continent such as NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa’s Development), and of its military involvement, South African respondents were generally not supportive, for a variety of reasons. South Africa’s role tends to be perceived in an altruistic light, as provider of finances and support (rather than as investor) and as costly for the South African taxpayer. Accordingly, there is a widespread belief that state resources for South African backlogs to combat inequalities ought to be given priority over external demands:

Our president is taking the lead in this Africa initiative [NEPAD] … It’s like Europe and the European Union … the difference is that Europe has money, it’s rich countries. (Soweto, Johannesburg)

The Sub-Saharan continent … I’m just afraid that they will become more and more dependent on South Africa … And us guys who pay tax. We will be helping Africa more, instead of our own people here. And when I’m saying, our own people, I don’t mean only us whites, I also mean blacks. I think charity should begin at home. (Roodeport 2, Johannesburg)

The government wants a relationship with the rest of the African countries. We should first look at our own people. You know, most of our people are still struggling;
the struggle is not over yet … struggle against poverty and discrimination which is
still big. And the sad part is that the people who really fought for the struggle is not
really benefiting now. (Atlantis, Cape Town)

A belief in exceptionalism and an evasion of identification with Africa are also
clearly expressed through narratives on African immigration to South Africa.
Perceptions of South Africa as a ‘land of milk and honey’ contribute toward the
image of African migrants as economic migrants, rather than political refugees
– of people who entered illegally in search of a better life or of an ‘easy buck’ and
who benefit immensely from their stay in South Africa:

They come because they see us as prosperous. South Africa – compared to their
countries – our streets are paved, we are light-years in advance … We are an
organised society; even in our squatter camps we are actually better-off … Six
Nigerians can live in my flat, pay me two thousand a month, that to them is first
class accommodation … they can go down, get a job at the Waterfront, get a job as a
parking attendant. What they earn, coupled with the weather, coupled with relative
law and order … living in a nice flat at a reasonable rate, is better than being in a
township in Sierra Leone. (Durbanville, Cape Town)

This image of the foreign migrant undermines what remains of the belief that
South Africa ought to remain mindful of past support by African countries for
the ANC in exile:

In the apartheid years, there was what they called exile and a lot of people used that,
and there was a lot of sympathy for certain groups in those days, and there were a lot
of those people there that side wanting to help this people over here. I see nothing
wrong with that, but I’m saying now that everything’s changed … don’t come in and
don’t try and take over, I mean they know the situation, 35 million blacks and there is
X amount percentage of them without work. They’ve been there to help. Why do they
want to take it away? (Kraaifontein 2, Cape Town)

We did not go to their countries to look for jobs. And we did not leave because of
corruption. People who left for outside countries went there for military training,
so that they could attack the apartheid government, not to seek jobs. But they are
coming to snatch bread from us. And then they capitalise on this matter. (Tsakane 1,
Johannesburg)

In short, xenophobia appears to be widespread in South Africa, and openly
expressed. Narratives regarding immigrants, Nigerians in particular, are infused
with stereotypes and prejudices. African immigrants are accused of a variety of social ills and criminal activities – drug dealing, arms trafficking, contract killings, and prostitution. Such sentiments have been expressed by South Africans from all socio-economic and ethno-racial backgrounds – by respondents living in Johannesburg and in Cape Town, in metropolitan areas and in rural Western Cape, in townships, in suburbs, and in informal settlements:

They just sell drugs … and another thing they are also used by some of us to destroy our community. They tell a foreigner that ‘we give you R400.00, remove this person.’ The foreigners will kill that person because it will be an unknown; these people do not have an identity. We can see that this one is a foreigner but home affairs do not have these people’s identity. So it is easier for us to be arrested in such cases. But it is not easy for them to be arrested. (Tsakane 1, Johannesburg)

African migrants are largely conceived as a burden upon South Africa’s scarce economic resources. Middle-income respondents focus their narratives on the impact of immigration on basic infrastructure, on public housing, and on the unskilled and semi-skilled job market:

I spoke to [a government official] this afternoon about the housing, this is my area of business, we were speaking about the housing [development] which is taking place … like all this RDP housing taking place and the question I posed him is what guarantee has he got for me that all these houses that the government is building, which is our tax-payers’ money, [are] going to South Africans and he could not give me an affirmative answer. Foreigners … (Bosmont, Johannesburg)

I’m just looking at the percentage of people [who are] without jobs and I think you have all these guys coming in and taking all the work that could have been given to or done by our local boys … I don’t mind hearing a French-speaking guy in the parking area, but then again that could have been one of our blacks doing the job, especially on the different flea markets. (Kraaifontein 2, Cape Town)

Among the poor, resentment about migrants was openly expressed regarding competition over scarce job opportunities. Foreigners represent cheap labour, and are believed to benefit from their illegal status in the country since they thereby evade taxes.

If you go to buildings especially Wimpy actually Rivonia consists of shopping centres that are full of places which sell food, Spar and so on. Ninety per cent of those who work in Rivonia are foreigners and the reason it is done that way is because
they exploit them. And we the children of this side, the people who have voted the government into power are the ones who are starving because jobs opportunities are filled by those ones. (Tsakane 1, Johannesburg)

This is the problem, because these people occupy spaces for our people to sell things in Cape Town. But our people are not having a chance to sell, because Cape Town is full of these people, they are everywhere. So maybe if the government can do something about these people, maybe it can give us a chance to find jobs. (Khayelitsha, Cape Town)

Discourse on immigration clearly revolves around notions of rights and obligations that respondents perceive to be attached to citizenship. By failing to implement stricter immigration policies, government is seen by many respondents to be reneging in its obligations towards citizens and voters:

The responsibility of our government is to see to it that the citizens of this country are protected … How do you expect a person who is untraceable, a foreigner for that matter, who has done something wrong to taste the cost of justice? It is very true that as a continent, Africa is a whole, we are Africans, but there is a need of this government of ours to have some regulations and rules which will be able to regulate the movements of the Africans in their own continent. We’re not saying they are the only people who are doing crime but at least if I am a SA citizen, I know if I am doing crime out there, one day I am going to be traced and I’ll have to face the law. The problem with these people is that they are doing crime knowing very well that nothing is going to happen to them. (Alexandra, Johannesburg)

As already pointed out, these narratives are shared by South Africans drawn from all ethnic, racial, and class or economic level backgrounds in focus group narratives. This suggests that they are based on instrumental (rather than aesthetic or symbolic) factors that derive from a definition of the continent in economic rather than racial terms. This is not to say that discourses on Africa and its inhabitants are devoid of any essentialist references. The vocabulary used by some white South African respondents differs from that of other South Africans in that social distance often takes on clear racial overtones:

That scares me, if you look at Africa, if you look the whole of Africa is black … and we are this fistful of whites here on the bottom, then it sometimes worries you. (Roodeport 2, Johannesburg)

In a few cases, narratives reveal a positive identification with the continent and
express frustrations with neo-colonial practices and of Western portrayals of Africa’s failures rather than praise of its successes:

I think there are possibilities on getting people to come and invest in different countries in Africa. There’s a lot more emphasis on getting the message out, especially to European businesses, that Africa is a wealth of talent and resources but I think there’s a long way to go. I think people’s perception of Africa is that it’s still primitive, very backward and that perception needs to change. (Rondebosch, Cape Town)

We’ve got a lot to offer, more than the gold and the silver and the diamonds that have been taken from this continent to build Europe, because Europe has been built with riches from here … In Europe, they still don’t want Africa to be part of the world … and [this] is not fair … But this generation is going to make it work because we’ve got a heart. There’s a desire to make this country and this continent a place to be. (Kayamandi, Western Cape)

To an extent, these views of Africa and of an African identity correspond with Sichone’s claim that one becomes ‘Africanised’ in relation to Europe.

Narratives from Gabon (Libreville) and Togo (Lomé)
Narratives from Gabon and Togo share a number of characteristics. Knowledge of South Africa is often sketchy, something often put down to distance: ‘South Africa is far away; we can’t really talk about it’. First-hand acquaintance of South Africa is rare, though a few Gabonese respondents had visited the country. Information is largely obtained from news reports, TV documentaries, magazines, and newspapers articles and therefore tends to conform to views of South Africa found in Western media. In particular, stereotypes and prejudices regarding levels of crime in South African cities, sexual violence, and HIV infections, which were said to ‘create fears’ among respondents, were common themes in narratives. In both cities, a degree of exoticism regarding ‘Zulus’ as custodians of a South African culture was mentioned.

South Africans keep their traditions intact … They are keeping their culture, if you look at their dances … their Zulu dances, they’re beautiful. Us as Kabiifié, we find ourselves through their dances, their movements, and their traditional dress. (Mixed languages, Lomé)

The fact that English rather than French is South Africa’s international language is well known to respondents. Though it has often been argued that language ‘is
a determinant factor in shared cultural identities’ on the continent (Sindjoun, 2000: 13), both Togolese and Gabonese respondents point to differences in colonial experience. These differences are perceived to reach beyond language. Anglophones are said to be more entrepreneurial, more ‘street-wise’, and less public-sphere oriented – ‘they have a leadership spirit’, a ‘business ethos’:

Most Anglophone countries are rich and South Africa is too. Anglophone countries seem to have a good mind to work with … They are more creative than us, they do things better than us. It seems like they are more educated, more advanced. I think it’s a question of colonisation … I think the French only taught us how to say intelligent things, how to speak and that’s it, whereas, the Anglophones, they have a know-how. (Kabiye II, Lomé)

The Anglophone and Francophone colonial powers didn’t have the same view on colonisation. You’ll agree with me that Francophone countries are less developed than Anglophone countries and I think that is what we regret the most from the French colonisation. The examples are obvious, today South Africa is here, Nigeria is another example … a country from ‘Black’ Africa, a country which has been colonised by Britain, is more advanced, more developed than most Francophone countries so it’s a pity that French colonisation acted in that way. (Fang I, Libreville)

In contradistinction to the South African narrative that NEPAD is ‘South Africa’s brainchild’, respondents in Libreville and Lomé locate the initiative in Anglophone Africa:

The role that SA is playing today, others had the same opportunity before to play this role and what did they do in terms of development? Nothing. If you look at the NEPAD’s people today, who thought about it? Anglophones, to whom you can add one single Francophone, A. Wade. The rest of them (Francophone leaders) just follow. (Fang I, Libreville)

Simultaneously, narratives express beliefs in a South African exceptionalism that sets it apart from other African countries. The ‘new’ South Africa is presented as a model ‘African’ country, a ‘window’ for Africa, a ‘dream’ country. It inspires pride for the continent as a whole and is used to refute common ‘Afro-pessimist’ representations. In political terms, it is represented as a model of peaceful transition, of ‘effective and representative democracy’, and of accommodation of various groups’ interests. The iconic role that Nelson Mandela plays in this narrative is significant:
Mandela is a myth to whom we owe respect. He is an emblem and could have acted like other Africans and stayed in power for a second, third or fourth mandate as is the case in Africa … But he only had one mandate in SA. It's this myth of Mandela which has allowed whites and blacks to accept each other. You can even look at some symbols … the different colours (of the national flag) … These are symbols which explain why SA has gone back so quickly to occupy an important position on the African international scene. (Fang I, Libreville)

It seems that the relationship between blacks and whites in South Africa is working well and if that is the case, then it … gives us some reassurance that one day, we'll be there too. We know that things are slow to change because people were used to certain ways for a long time but they are changing in South Africa … We are all black here but there have been ethnic wars so we hope that what happened in South Africa can happen here. (Ewe, Lomé)

In economic terms, the country is seen to be a 'driving force' in terms of industrial development and medical research in Africa, and its infrastructure is described as very advanced.

South Africa is a model for us because the European countries tend to say that, in Africa, there isn't much good, but when one looks at it today, it's really a country of which Africa is proud … It is almost the United States of Africa … it's a model for African countries because it has achieved development compared to the rest of Africa and it's our model in comparison to Europe … It's the only country which can measure with big powers, economically, demographically and culturally, it's an African power. (Fang III, Libreville)

Accordingly, expectations regarding South Africa taking the lead on the continent are common. The idea that South Africa’s and the continent’s economic interests coincide – an idea expressed by a number of South African focus group respondents – is echoed by respondents in Gabon and Togo. In Gabon, such calls are often concretised since cooperative ventures in the fields of health services and universities are known to many Libreville respondents.

I wish for SA to bring us its technological knowledge. If SA is what it is today, it is because South Africans have taken into their hands the future of their country. If they can teach us this way of doing things, we would appreciate it. (Fang I, Libreville)

I think that South Africa is going forward and when they do so, for instance in the research field, what is certain is that we also are going to benefit from it. Yes, SA can
help the African continent to go forward. In Africa, SA is a power in many fields, industrial and otherwise, it is a power. (Mixed languages, Lomé)

The need for South Africa to take the lead in continental institutions was also raised in a number of focus groups. South Africa is seen to have emerged as a credible political leader and model on the continent after its successful struggle against apartheid.

SA must play a leadership role. I think that as a people that has suffered as much as they did … I can remember seeing the Soweto events, the 16th of June … I was hurt in my soul. And as people that have the means and the freedom to choose their leaders today, SA will have a leadership role. Our eyes are turned toward this country. (Fang II, Libreville)

In Gabon, moreover, where the French presence is experienced as pervasive, South Africa is portrayed as a potential countervailing presence:

I'd like for South Africa to do what Asians do. The Chinese are present in Gabon at commercial and financial levels. SA should also come here without minding ‘our colonials’ because they have this worrying attitude … As soon as they saw the Chinese coming in, the French had a problem with it and tried stop our cooperation with China. We need a country that can act as a policeman, even one without uniform … SA could play this role. (Fang III, Libreville)

These narratives on South Africa’s potential role on the continent express an instrumental rather than essentialist image of South Africa in the sense that they associate the country and its government with economic and political characteristics rather than with ascribed characteristics of its population. On the other hand, there were notions related to more essentialist features in certain narratives, though these were clearly exceptions. These tended to be expressed in terms of black racial solidarity:

South Africa is a country that shows that the black man can do something, that the black man has a place somewhere. We admired the courage of Nelson Mandela who showed us, as black people, that we all have this courage and that there is some hope for our country as well. (Ewe, Lomé)

We understand that South Africans won’t like it if foreigners go there and receive the fruits of their struggle, of their suffering while they themselves are still living in poverty … but whatever small finances blacks have, especially the black middle class,
they have to invest it in other countries, they must come and cooperate with other African countries. (Fang II, Libreville)

Simultaneously, in the case of one focus group, South Africa’s racial mix was found both to be puzzling and to detract from the otherwise progressive image of South Africa on the continent:

South Africa … we don’t understand … We know Nelson Mandela … but is it Africans who are over there or whites? We don’t know. We know there were problems but we still don’t understand what is happening over there. It’s an African country but we don’t understand why there is a dominance of whites, we really don’t understand this racism. Those whites, are they Africans or are they foreigners? What is South Africa really, to which continent does it belong? (Kabiye II, Lomé)

12.4 Conclusion

South African narratives about the African continent reveal an evasion of identification with Africa by most respondents. These narratives, shared by black and white, poor and rich, seem to suggest that Africa is rarely perceived in essentialist terms, as a black continent, but in instrumental terms, as a continent in disarray which in turn impacts negatively on the national economy and labour market. Though it is often stated that ‘many South Africans [are] still largely ignorant about other African countries and this has fuelled the current xenophobia in the country’ (Hendricks & Whiteman, 2004: 8), these narratives suggest that an evasion of identification with Africa is due less to ignorance than to rational choice, a choice based ‘on a fair assessment of the cost of being African’ (Sichone, 2004). These representations of other African countries moreover ‘matter because they are used to articulate expressions of personal and national identity and are a reflection of the local political context’ (Nyamnjoh, 2002: 632). These narratives, accordingly, shared as they appear to be by many South Africans, probably point to an equally shared, significant identification with South Africa and with rights derived from its citizenship. It would seem then that the multiple identities South Africans construct for themselves extend beyond the popular singular paradigm of race and class.

Gabonese and Togolese Francophone narratives distinguish between Francophone and Anglophone Africa and their divergent colonial histories and experiences. In so doing, they locate the meaning of Africa in a European–African context. The image of the ‘new’ South Africa as a credible leader and model on the continent, in both the political and economic spheres, is widely stated and
accepted. In this sense, South Africa is presented as an African country that could help to reverse Western Afro-pessimist representations of the continent. At least among members of the urban focus groups analysed in this chapter, this mentor image of South Africa appears to supersede any concerns that South Africa as continental hegemon may misuse its power. In their narratives, South Africa is squarely located on the African continent and plays the role of ‘an important locus in the post-colonial imagery of Africa’ (Sindjoun, 1999: 41). This image contrasts with those of European countries and of neo-colonial practices.

Respondents in Libreville, Lomé, Cape Town, and Johannesburg construct images of various Africas. The main cleavage within these images (beyond regional, linguistic, or ethnic divides) is between a rich and a poor Africa. While South Africa is seen beyond its borders as a potential motor of development in Africa, in the country itself, Africa is seen as a limitation. These images are also sometimes racialised. In Gabon and Togo, this serves to legitimise expectations that brothers and sisters from the South will offer support and protection to those in need. Curiously, in South Africa, where race remains part and parcel of the way residents talk about themselves (Bekker & Leildé, 2000), images of Africa are rarely racialised. This finding underlines the situational nature of racial discourse and racial identifications.

Finally, what of South African exceptionalism? As Mamdani (1998) puts it, ‘a hallmark of much of the South African intelligentsia [is that] … while South Africa is a part of Africa geographically, it is not quite culturally and politically, and certainly not economically.’ While South African respondents’ narratives appear to conform to this hallmark, it is equally apparent to them that South Africa is actively engaging in continental activities as an African member. Though they may not support this new role, they cannot but be aware of it, not least since other Africans in their narratives appear to be embracing South Africa as an African mentor. One clear implication is that the images of Africa that will be constructed in the future by residents within South Africa as well as without will be influenced by these changing circumstances and narratives.
### Table 11.1: Focus groups, South Africa, by city, neighbourhood, income level, and ethno-linguistic affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Neighbourhood</th>
<th>Income Level</th>
<th>Ethno-Linguistic Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cape Town</td>
<td>Jo Slovo Park 1 (X)</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Afrikaans speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jo Slovo Park 2 (X)</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>English speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Khayelitsha (X)</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Xhosa speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eersterivier (a)</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>English speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lavender Hill (a)</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Xhosa speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tsakane 1 (M)</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Mixed languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tsakane 2 (M)</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Mixed languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alexandra (M)</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>English speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tembisa (M)</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Mixed languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Soweto (Z)</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Zulu speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johannesburg</td>
<td>Kayamandi (X)</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Afrikaans speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summergreens (M)</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>English speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Atlantis (a)</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Mixed languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rondebosch (e)</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>English speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Roodepoort 1 (a)</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Mixed languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Roodepoort 2 (a)</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Mixed languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Krugersdorp e)</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>English speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Randburg (e)</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Mixed languages</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:**
- A: Afrikaans speaking
- E: English speaking
- X: Xhosa speaking
- M: Mixed languages
- Z: Zulu speaking

### Table 11.2: Focus groups, Togo and Gabon, by city, income level, and ethno-linguistic affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Neighbourhood</th>
<th>Income Level</th>
<th>Ethno-Linguistic Affiliation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lomé</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mixed languages</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Fang I (Ngundie)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fang III (Nkomo)</td>
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<td>Fang II (Nkole)</td>
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<td>Libreville</td>
<td>Fang II (Ngundie)</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Fang I (Ngundie)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:**
- I: Igloko (E)
- II: Igloko (X)
- III: Fang III (Nkomo)
- IV: Fang II (Ngundie)
- V: Fang I (Ngundie)

### Table 11.1: Focus groups, South Africa, by city, neighbourhood, income level, and ethno-linguistic affiliation

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<td>Jo Slovo Park 2 (X)</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>English speaking</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tsakane 1 (M)</td>
<td>Middle</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tsakane 2 (M)</td>
<td>Middle</td>
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**Note:**
- A: Afrikaans speaking
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