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Beyond Self Containment: On the Politics of Identity and Culture in a 'Glocal' Society

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Abstract

As a result of the epiphany of giant multinational media conglomerates, transnational trade networks and the politics of globalization, it is tempting to believe that individual and national identities have morphed. This article argues that such homogenization in relation to individuation is tedious to accept. It draws from theories of symbolic interactionism, social psychology, Foucauldian, and postcolonial constructs to hold that structuralist significations of postmodern society ought to be contested. The article emphasizes that human identity can hardly be spoken of in *either/or* terms, by revisiting notions of selfhood, culture, and bio-power. The paper concludes by examining how these elements act, shape, and constrain individual identities in 'glocal' societies, rather than as persons affected by them in homologous deterministic ways.

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1. Introduction

All cultures revolve around their human architects (Williams, 1958). By "human architects" I refer to the capacities displayed by humans as both agents and consumers of technology (See Ellul, 1964; Freenberg, 1999; Heidegger, 1977; Innis, 1950). As *homo socius*, we are not only bonded by filiation but more importantly by a plexus of social ties. This is why we often engage in taken-for-granted phatic communion even when we sometimes do not want to do so. We cherish our individual way of life, and yet we have a strong sense of the mores, norms, and conventions that regulate the public sphere. There can be no doubt that it is difficult to conceive of the human corporeal self outside of a culture (Goffman, 1959; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). To a large extent, the culture one is born into defines one's sense of awareness, and provides the social environment needed for communication with significant others. In *Mind, Self, and Society*, the American social behaviorist George Herbert Mead (1965, p. 233) notes that an individual "can never find expression and could never have come into existence at all except in terms of a social environment". For Mead, cooperative communication creates in a culture a principle of social organization and a universe of discourse.

This universe of discourse is understood by the signifiers of a given culture. There is therefore a sense in which individuals in a society are conditioned to act, operate, and communicate in accordance with the laid down structures of their society. In a word, an individual is a political being. And yet is it possible in postmodern society to refer to individuals as total products of their cultures? What does it mean to be a human self in a fast changing technological society? To what extent do the privileged orders and structures in society engage with individuals' sense of self? In this paper, I argue that the concept of self in postmodern society is an intricately complex

one that ought to be discussed from the perspective of glocalization.

In this context, *glocalization* evokes a sense of how individuals are increasingly becoming products of both the ways of thinking and doing in their immediate micro-social environments and the macro-structures of the international community given that we live in what McLuhan (1964) termed 'a networked global village'. Joseph Oduro-Frimpong (2009, p. 1085) simply defines it as "the nuanced juncture of global-local interactions". Popularized by Robertson (1992), glocalization is experienced when a global phenomenon is re-appropriated into a local context and then undergoes a transformation through specific socio-cultural practices. He holds that the transformed phenomenon, however, simultaneously retains both global and local features. Globalization, on the other hand, assumes there exists homogeneity of signifiers across cultures. Such a position, all the same, tends to ignore the subtleties and uniqueness of social beings as having peculiar identities and cultures. This article points out the Michelin of misdirection of the signifier/signified binary, and demonstrates that this association is misleading. I say misleading because it barely accounts for the political nature of culture in post/modern society. Stuart Hall makes this point much more lucid:

The problem is that the manner in which this 'subject of culture is conceptualized is of a trans-historical and 'universal' character: it addresses the subject-in-general, not historically-determinate social subjects... (Hall, 1980, p. 70).

Hall (1980) insists that there is no necessary correspondence between denotative and connotative associations, but rather there are polyvalent senses. Or as Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 9) intimate, "... one can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy, even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad".

There are therefore no containments, no roots as far as the human subject is concerned. Humans act and are acted upon in rhizomatic ways. This is why issues of ideology, hegemony, and power cannot have a homologous effect on humans in a 'glocal' community. In a way I seek to rekindle Lyotard's (1982) concerns in 'What is the Postmodern?' in which he sought answers to the challenges post/modern society poses.

Throughout the ensuing pages I first discuss the concept of selfhood, and how individuals become objects of the State apparatus in a 'glocal' society. This is then followed by a discussion of culture and identity in a 'glocal' society from the perspective of postcolonial theory. I shall also use the Ghanaian situation as a reference point.

2. Selfhood, (Un)Consciousness, and Glocalization

Apprehension of selfhood in 'glocal' communities must first grapple with the nature of individual consciousness. One's consciousness plays a significant role in understanding one's identities. In Freudian psychology, every psychical act begins as an unconscious one, and it may either remain so or go on developing into consciousness, depending on how it is met with resistance. For Freud consciousness is a state of awareness because what is conscious is ordered. On the contrary, unconscious events, however active they may be, emanate from a hypnotic state that rests in what he terms 'a condition of latency'. Put differently, for phenomena and events to be conscious in our minds, they have to be strongly rooted in order to be brought back to memory. Weak consciousness, according to this thought, is no consciousness. Freud (1912) writes:

Certain deficiencies of function of most frequent occurrence among healthy people, e.g. *lapsus linguae*, errors in memory and speech, forgetting of names, etc., may easily be shown to

depend on action of strong unconscious ideas in the same way as neurotic symptoms (p. 12, *Italics in original*).

What forms lasting impressions in our memories are those things that constantly engage our thoughts? Freud's psychoanalysis, in my estimation, provides valuable clues to the tethering understanding of the human subject. His thesis illuminates the notion of *decentered subjectivity*, which Elliott (2009) defines as a profound mistrust in the reliability of consciousness that forms the basis of knowledge, and Lacan's view of the self best construed as narcissistic. Although Freud's exegesis is strong in its explanatory adequacy it, nonetheless, inheres a bias. That is, his analysis of consciousness emanates from his engagements with neurotic and psychotic persons. For this reason, to what extent are his claims binding or limiting? How generalizable do they hold? Don't cultural and biological factors contribute to nuances of interpretive differences in psychoanalysis? Freud does not seem to come clear on this, and rather appears too universalistic in his approach as though it were a given. His theory in a sense emphasizes a global perspective of consciousness, or rather unconsciousness. It is not located within the framework of glocality.

It is for these seeming limitations that the works of Lacan are so celebrated. Acclaimed as the father of post-structuralism, his writings open our eyes "to a world of social differences, to explore and affirm Otherness—particularly its effects upon all identities" (cited in Elliott, 2009, p. 92).

His works focus on the ego and its instability in the world. For Lacan (1949), imagination is the underlying principle by which all individuals come to the knowledge of who they are, and the constitution of their unique selves. It is this imagination that triggers in them an understanding of how others look at them as actors in the real world. This line of reasoning was based on his firm conviction that identity is a *fundamental division*.

By 'fundamental division' Lacan sets the unconscious life of the subject in the direction of lures, snares, and misadventures. Using the mirror metaphor, he evinces that individual selves can be likened to the narcissism of infants that see and contemplate their images, or *imago*, in the mirror. To the infants, everything in the mirror is a true reflection of them, and not necessarily an illusion. The infants are unconscious of the distinction between their images in the mirror and their true collected corporeal selves in the material world. Thus says Lacan (1949, p. 2):

We only have to understand the mirror stage as an identification in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image—whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*.

Following Lacan, the mirror is a conduit of fiction. It is not what it seems to be, and that even though it provides a sense of purpose and identification of the self in the spatial world, the mirror, in fact, is an instrument of distortion and deformation of the self. It is in his own words a *line of fiction*. Because infants are incapable of distinguishing the image in the mirror and their actual selves (ego) in the real world, infants do not have an informed perspective of themselves in life, and therefore have a false self. It is this interpretation that Lacan imputes to the existence of humankind. For him humans are a lost people who have no true pictures of their central selves. But isn't Lacan's view of the self mordant? We will need to ask a few more critical questions in order to really get to the heart of this problem. Elliott (2009, p. 170), for example, asks "what is it that leads the infant to (mis)recognize itself in the mirror? How, exactly, does the individual cash in on this conferring of self, however deformed or brittle?" The point is that Lacan assumes a

priori that infants will have an impressionistic, illusory accounts of themselves only in relation to the screen, and yet this same assumption does not preclude the possibility that this knowledge of the infants may have developed, *ex ante*, the mirror experience. It is also the case that Lacan's concept of self-awareness is quite pessimistic. He seems to say that no individual can escape narcissism and become self-conscious, self-reliant, and self-resistant. If this were so, one perhaps would not be wrong to question the means by which he himself came to an apprehension of this 'verity'. Thus we need to move beyond this notion of selfhood in order to understand how relations of power, for instance, act and condition human agency.

3. The Individual and State Power

Whether or not humans are narcissistic or solipsistic, we are *nolens volens* a part of the cultural mechanisms of our societies. Such constitution requires that we shape and be shaped by the institutional apparatuses of the State. Michel Foucault's philosophical contemplations, in this case, remain seminal to the study of structuralism in post/modern society. With Foucault originates the concept of power which creates an asymmetrical core/periphery structure. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), he presents a Marxist view of society as one that is ordered in a manner that privileges an omnipresent surveillance of the periphery by the upper class. The Panopticon machine constantly keeps its gaze on everyone unbeknown to them. Foucault writes, "He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication ...The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad" (Foucault, 1975, p. 182). Such an apparatus results in disequilibrium in a consciously hierarchical society. This system, in Foucault's thought, constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. It identifies, individuates, and determines the individual's station.

For Foucault the state exercises power over individuals in two significant ways. This is achieved either by controlling their relations, or by separating out the potentially dangerous elements amongst them. Segregation and differentiation are the main processes. One other means is through subtle coercion by which all authorities, the school, the prison, the hospital, exercise control over individuals by creating a “binary division and branding”. According to this thought, one is either brilliant or dull, as in the case of the school, mad/insane, if one happens to be incarcerated in the four walls of the prison, and normal/abnormal so long as one happens to be a patient. According to Foucault, authorities reduce humans to atomic particles just so they could measure, supervise and correct them in an effort to maintain conformity, law, and order. In this way, all of society has been structured to so behave, and act accordingly so that discipline becomes a component of persons’ schema.

Foucault’s argument is further extended by Giorgio Agamben. Agamben (1995) notes that the production of a bio-political body is the original activity of sovereign power. Rereading Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, Agamben argues that it was at the dawn of the modern era that natural life began to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of State power and politics. Bio-politics is the interference of the State in the constitution of what Agamben terms *bare life*. Under this new capitalist framework, the lives and bodies of individuals come under the constant watch of State regulations. Here there is a complete paradigm shift from territorialism to population control. In other words, the State has a strong say in, for example, the sexual conducts of its citizenry. The Chinese government, as an example, has decreed how many children a couple should have in their lifetime. Birth rate, mortality rate, and longevity are also under intensive global and local scrutiny all in an attempt to directly

intervene in the sovereign wills of the citizenry. Agamben remarks:

Placing biological life at the center of its calculations, the modern State therefore does nothing other than to bring to light the secret tie uniting power and bare life, thereby reaffirming the bond (derived from tenacious correspondence between the modern and the archaic which one encounters in the most diverse spheres (1995, p. 6).

Agamben re-echoes Foucault by observing that the analysis of power in modern society need not only focus on juridical or institutional manifestations, but more importantly it must evaluate the transformation of the power of institutional structures in the everyday lives of individuals relative to their quality of existence. He comes strongly on that because, for him, politics has the power to determine, alter and designate human identity.

The writings of Foucault and Agamben, *inter alia*, make a fine case for inquiry into the bio-politics of African states. Given Africa’s membership in the United Nations and the World Health Organization, the African quality of life is pretty much tied to the projects executed on the global scene. For example, Ghana is expected to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2020. The state expects that every child born to a Ghanaian parent who resides in Ghana to be immunized against the six killer childhood diseases, for instance. But while it is expedient to argue that these initiatives are imperative and even contingent, we need not be oblivious that they are programs run in tandem with the aspirations of the global community. Too often many African nation-states have quickened their steps to internalize the things that are of global character without being critical of it no less than re-appropriate them. As Agamben (1995) notes, the problem with many states is that they apply theories and models of nation-building they have no part in, and Ghana is no exception. Herein lies the danger. When we

operate at the level of globalization for globalization's sake, individual identity is bruised if not lost. This position, in fact, is the *topos* of postcolonial theory.

4. Culture and Identity in Postcolonial Discourse

It is quite tempting to think that postcolonial theorists vociferously speak against globalization, and that all that they do is clamor for the restitution of things that are basically local. In my mind, they seriously question this epistemic division of labor, and thus argue for what I perceive to be a glocalization of culture and identity. What I see as their project is the unmasking of the horrors caused by the polar ends in order to reveal the healthy dialectic between local and global manifestations of domination. Take, for instance, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1993) *Moving the Center*. In this work Ngũgĩ lays bare the continual manifestation of imperialism in the 'Third' World. According to him, imperialism today can be felt at a much more heightened stage through the mechanisms of neo-colonialism and the leading role of the United States. He says that the *telos* of colonialism, and neo-colonialism, is to gain "complete ownership of, management and control of the entire system of production, exchange and distribution of the wealth in its home base and those of other nations and territories" (Ngũgĩ 1993, p. 50). It also aims to overcome increasing demands for social change in neo-colonies by dividing, weakening, and countering any form of resistance. Isn't the case of the Arab Spring and the murder of Lybia's Muamar Gaddafi a disturbing tale?

In the old regime, this form of greed which the imperial powers of the West courted, Ngũgĩ points out, was made manifest by their forceful occupation of the means of production in conquered colonies. In Ghana, the colonial project officially commenced on March 6, 1884 after tedious struggles between the English and the fragmented, less

technologically sophisticated kingdoms of the Gold Coast were over. A similar story is told of the occupation of South America by the United States following the retreat of European powers such as Spain and Portugal, through evasion rather than intervention. The occupation is clearly depicted in Mattelart's (1996) *The Invention of Communication* in which the author says that the main motive behind this evasion was to gain access to the mode of production in that region. The plunder continued on a global scale until the end of the Second World War.

Despite the political freedom gained by colonies from the West, the imperial claws can still be felt today. The problem with the fight against neo-colonialism is that it is an ideological battle. According to Ngũgĩ, this project has been systematic, self-sustaining, and totalizing, encompassing all arenas of life. Neo-colonialism thrives on cultural hegemonies and prejudices. Through such mediums as the colonial educational system (the school), religion, or rather the church, and the mass media of communication—print, electronic, computer-mediated—there has been established in the consciousness of citizens in less developed nations a certain conditioning of inferiority. This mithridatization, as Ellul (1965) calls it, is that poor nations have been made not only to accept a propagandized state of affairs, but also to articulate and use it as part of their national discourses, identities, and politics.

For Ngũgĩ, the negative effects of 'cultural control' in neo-colonized states are beyond measure. They have affected signifiers such as "the entire system of education, language and language use, literature, religion, the media" which have resulted in "the transmission of a certain ideology, set of values, outlook, attitudes, feelings etc., and hence power over the whole area of consciousness" (Ngũgĩ 1993, p. 51). What should we expect of those whom Ngũgĩ calls "fake freedom fighters" in the context of Africa? History has shown us quite

graphically how ersatz it is to build on structures we have no part in. The whole world is amazed how a country such as Ivory Coast could at a go crawl on its belly in a twinkle of an eye after three decades of touted unprecedented economic growth in the middle of the economic turmoil West Africa finds itself.

So grave are the ills of neo-colonialism that today, at least in certain quarters of West Africa, young men refer to the ladies they are enamored of as their “obronis” in Akan (White mistresses) regardless of the ladies’ glaring skin pigmentation. And so goes the old myth that one need not further their journey to the chapel if on their way they meet the White man: they may as well return home: They have seen God himself! Fanon’s (1963, p. 7) observations in *The Wretched of the Earth* are worth considering:

The Church in the colonies is a white man’s Church, a foreigners’ Church. It does not call the colonized to the ways of God, but to the ways of the master, the ways of the oppressor. And as we know, in this story many are called but few are chosen.

But Ngũgĩ is no pessimist. He ends on the note that there are brilliant attempts by a third group in developing countries to cause social transformation as opposed to others who gleefully lean on the old ways of thinking and acting. And I wonder whether Nigeria, Ivory Coast, and of course, Ghana, could be found in this circle of optimists.

Fanon’s (1952) “The Fact of Blackness” is yet another gory depiction of the pain of being perhaps mistakenly born black in a world in which order, progress and rationality is defined by those who believe they have been ordained by the heavens to govern the Earth: a certain manifest destiny. The point, as Fanon makes it so lucid, is that the metaphoric furnace blacks are thrown into stems from primordial stereotypes and prejudices.

Lippmann (1922) says that stereotypes thrive on the economy of thought and effort, and are useful for preventing the human mind to think beyond itself. One of the worst results of stereotypes and prejudices of racism—including anti-Semitism—is the acceptance of descriptors leveled against the Other. But who is to blame?

We would not have to conceive of the plight of Africans solely from without. It is a problem also from within. Quite a large number of African academics appreciate the essence of being African. In many instances, the sense of being of many people in ex-colonies is being deeply challenged by the paradoxes of progress vs. development; patriotism vs. self-accomplishment; knowledge vs. tradition. These are some of the issues a ‘glocal’ society should be considering in these pressing days and not necessarily the idealization of racial discourses, the tendencies of which are divisive and regrettably derisive. Of course we would reminisce the grandeur of the Black race in great civilizations such as the Empire of Egypt, or the massive kingdoms of Songhai, of Mali, and of Ghana. Of course it is easy to point accusing fingers at He who “wants the world; he wants it for himself alone. He finds himself predestined master of this world and him. He enslaves it. An acquisitive relation is established between the world and him” (Fanon, 1952, p. 73). I am in no way saying that we have no cause to rethink the hermeneutics of our present degeneration. All I am asking is the stoppage of this pseudo-demagoguery, this self-pity, this self-hate. Speaking of our conditions in these terms is the rumination of our lost glitter.

But who is to blame when all that we seem to be doing is to apply models of development we have little contributed to? Do African nation-states also need to put up skyscrapers as an index of their progress? As it stands, education in Africa is overtly Euro-centric. Fanon (1963, p. 11) strongly believes that the root of this problem lies

in its narcissistic monologue the colonialist bourgeoisie, by way of its academics, had implanted in the minds of the colonized that the essential values—remain eternal despite all errors attributable to man. The colonized intellectual accepted the cogency of these ideas and there in the back of his mind stood a sentinel on duty guarding the Greco-Roman pedestal.

There can be no doubt that what we see on the African continent is an endorsement of the colonialist project, covert or overt. Let's take the apparatus of democracy in Africa for example. Should democracy in Africa copy *ipsissima verba* how it is practiced in America or Britain? Can't democracy be 'glocalized' at least, if not localized entirely? The way to go is to engage in negotiations, re-appropriations, and resistance

A final point to make is that 'glocalization' also entails negotiations, re-appropriations, and resistance of global significations. Local re-significations of global significations can currently be felt in, for example, the mass media of communication, and mass culture. Oduro-Frimpong's (2009) case study of glocalization trends in Ghana's hiplife music makes a fine case. Despite the massive presence of rap and hip-hop, Ghanaians have created their unique genre of hip-pop, that is hiplife—a blend of hiline and hip-hop—through re-appropriations and creative adaptations of mannerisms, fashion, style and rhythm of American-based hip-hop artists. It helps to point out that such glocalization recognizes the politics of power at play: the dominant and the dominated. To "copy" *in toto* the Western genre is to deny one's own genre of music in the local arena (Oduro-Frempong, 2009). It also needs to be acknowledged that even though hiline is mainly thought to be traditionally distinct and African, it nonetheless makes use of Euro-centric instrumental accompaniments to

produce Ghanaian rhythms. It is difficult to distinguish global processes from local ones: They can at best be glocal.

The re-appropriation of hip-pop as part of the hiplife movement, thus, serves as a resisting force against total immersion into this Western style of music. In a way, this points that the accounts of Adorno and Horkheimer (1949) and Adorno (1991) about the influence of American mass culture the world over, perhaps, may be a little exaggerated. Glocalization of hip-hop in Ghana also functions as a strategic move of introducing the uncommon into the musical scene in order to gain a competitive edge over key players, and yet ensuring that it does not lose its traditional home-based ethos. In a word, glocalization reveals that, regardless of resistance, negotiations and re-appropriation, there are hardly any isoglosses of communities.

5. Concluding Remarks

The locus of this article is that the homogenization of individual life in relation to a global society is tedious to accept. The *raison d'être* is that society has evolved from being stubbornly structuralist to post-structuralist such that its significations need to be contested. Human identity can hardly be spoken of in *either/or* terms. Furthermore, this claim recognizes the place of ideology as a conduit of the manifestation of power differential, bio-power, and capitalism. I have argued that these constructs, to a significant extent, define humans, their identities and cultures as unique selves in glocal societies, rather than as individuals affected by them in homologous deterministic ways. The identity of individuals in a glocal society, then, must move beyond its present self containment. The self needs to be deterritorialized.

This rhetoric of deterritorialization has implications for the nature of international politics. Given the increasingly manifest role of the mass media, transnational trade

networks, and the clarion call for world peace and the New World Order discourse in the light of mass scale terrorism and nuclear weapons of mass destruction, global warming (Nartey & Coker, 2011), and health politics (Coker, 2013), there has appeared, more than ever, the will by key players on the international front to efface human agency and autonomy in favor of so-called common-sensical ways. We need to be mindful that as individuals what distinguishes us in all our dealings, in spite of global, political and economic pressures, is our individual sense of appreciation of the above-mentioned phenomena. Individuality can neither be sacrificed nor compromised for homogenization. Should this happen the dictionaries will have to make new entries to describe the new specie. We are already cyborgs (Haraway, 1991).

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