

# Africa and Humanism

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## Introduction

The basic claim of this chapter is that humanism in Africa cannot be discussed in isolation from issues pertaining to tradition and modernity. To be sure, this conceptual pair has been central to many attempts at understanding Africa. The general assumption has largely been the interchangeable nature of African life ways with tradition. In other words, what is African is traditional because Africa is traditional anyway. This paper takes a different perspective by cautioning against the failure to distinguish African life ways from tradition. The paper argues that this failure is responsible for the assumption that there is something intrinsically humanistic about African life ways, the search for which does not present any special problem. In fact, precisely because Africa and tradition are very distinct entities, any attempt at understanding humanism in Africa must start by appreciating the difficulties which the concept of humanism poses.

At the centre of the discussion in this chapter is the Enlightenment understanding of humanism. Drawing from Kant, Fichte and Leibniz through Wilhelm von Humboldt, Goethe and Schiller to Jean-Paul Sartre in more recent times, this paper defines humanism as the search for the fulfillment of the individual under conditions which place the onus on human agency molded within the framework of a history made possible by social action. Such an understanding of humanism reveals immediately that the assumption that African life forms may be naturally associated with humanism is a highly problematic one. More fundamentally however, it can be argued without being overly deterministic that humanism requires the fulfillment of certain social conditions in order to obtain. Furthermore, such conditions are modern in nature and can hardly obtain in a traditional setting. African societies may be humane in the way that many societies are, but they are not humanistic in the strict sense of the word. The African continent has, however, been undergoing processes of social change which have placed humanism on the African agenda. Those processes, which are historical in nature, will be at the centre of this paper.

It may appear strange to approach the issue of humanism in Africa through a detour that takes us through the tradition/modernity dichotomy. Yet no conceptual pair has been so central to the retrieval of Africa as an object of social scientific inquiry than this one. Ignoring it would be at the cost of a fuller understanding of the matter at hand. There is a lot to the assumption that Africa and the traditional are somehow interchangeable. In fact, there is a lot more than the problematic implication that all cultures are humanistic in nature and the task of any inquiry into humanism in different cultural settings consists in finding essential home-grown forms.

While the tradition/modernity dichotomy may be seen as problematic in more ways than one, it still remains important for the conceptual clarification which it can reveal in attempts at understanding the sociology of culture in different settings. Probably the most objectionable aspect of the dichotomy, one which has not ceased to fuel intense debates about the role of ethnocentrism in the social sciences, is the teleological assumption made by modernization theories concerning the fate of societies held to be traditional. This assumption held that such societies would not only undergo processes of social change which would make them increasingly more like Western society but more importantly, it was based on the belief that a change in such terms was unavoidable and desirable. In this respect, the history of European contact with Africa can be understood as the history of the attempt to bring this historicist claim into fruition. Early critical comments on anthropology for example, blamed the discipline for aiding colonial rulers in their enterprise (Leclerc 1972). Even developmental aid in our own day has been subjected to harsh criticism for the same reasons.

The charge against anthropology was that it helped create an image of non-European societies which made them inevitable objects of European civilizing intervention. These societies were depicted as timeless cultural black holes incapable of effecting change themselves. A very symptomatic offshoot of such charges was the discussion that pitted Marshal Sahlins, a well known American anthropologist against Gananath Obeyesekere, a Princeton-based psychoanalyst and anthropologist originally from Sri Lanka. The latter took issue with the description of the role of mythological thinking and practice provided by the former to account for the death of the legendary Captain Cook (Obeyesekere 1992) in the Pacific. Sahlins (Sahlins 1987) had argued that Hawaiians had slain Captain Cook on the wrong, but well-grounded assumption, that he was the cyclically returning God *Lono*, who, following tradition, should be ritually killed. Obeyesekere, in contrast, argued that Captain Cook had fallen victim to profane considerations which, in the final analysis, had dictated his death. In other words, Obeyesekere was arguing that to account for social action among seemingly backward non-European cultures and societies, one required the same interpretive skills and frames of reference that were necessary everywhere. The assumption that social action could be accounted for differently appeared to offend Obeyesekere's sense of universalism in approaching anthropology.

While Obeyesekere's claims may appear plausible on a theoretical, and

perhaps even a normative level; they may be problematic to the extent that they are silent on structural differences among societies and the role which these differences may play in encouraging patterns of behavior, attitudes and beliefs. Terms like “simple societies” or “complex societies” may be objectionable on the grounds that they draw from an ethnocentric position which places Europe as the standard and thereby fails to acknowledge the diverse ways in which a society may be simple or complex, for that matter. Yet they aim at a much more subtle point of extreme importance in appreciating the nature of social action in different settings. Durkheim’s discussion of forms of integration (Durkheim 1978) and their effects on the division of social labor were not only mere classificatory contrivances against the Rest (as opposed to the “West”), but rather attempts at making available to analysts ways of appreciating the richness of social relations. The same goes to Ferdinand Tönnies useful distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) (Tönnies 1963). Towards the end of his celebrated *Science as a Vocation*, Weber presents an image of the “savage” which provides valuable insights not only into the nature of modern society, but also into the rich texture of individual responsibility for one’s fate that went lost in the transition to modernity. He writes:

Does it mean that we, today, for instance, everyone sitting in this hall, have a greater knowledge of the conditions of life under which we exist than has an American Indian or a Hottentot? Hardly. Unless he is a physicist, one who rides on the streetcar has no idea how the car happened to get into motion. And he does not need to know. He is satisfied that he may “count” on the behavior of the streetcar, and he orients his conduct according to this expectation; but he knows nothing about what it takes to produce such a car so that it can move. The savage knows incomparably more about his tools. When we spend money today I bet that even if there are colleagues of political economy here in the hall, almost every one of them will hold a different answer in readiness to the question: How does it happen that one can buy something for money – sometimes more and sometimes less? The savage knows what he does in order to get his daily food and which institutions serve him in this pursuit. The increasing intellectualization and rationalization do not, therefore, indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives (Weber 1946: 142).

No social scientist today would speak as candidly as Weber did. Many today might even take offence at the language used by Weber. However, there is a lot of structural wisdom in Weber’s remarks which boils down to the need to pay attention to the context within which forms of conduct, attitudes and beliefs emerge. By the same token, claims about humanism in Africa must be tempered by careful analysis of the societal context within which certain properties of social action are thought to be manifestations of humanism. Indeed, as I will further contend, there has been a tendency within African Studies to see social phenomena occurring in Africa as features of the essence of African culture, when such phenomena might be more adequately

understood and analyzed as structural properties of a very specific type of society. The binary opposition between tradition and modernity has become problematic over the years. One reason for this has been the manner in which the opposition was used to make veiled commentaries about the natural order of things – cultures and individuals – on the assumption that certain societies and individuals, i.e. the West and Westerners, occupied a privileged place on the evolutionary ladder.

However, as the persistence of problems in state building in Africa adamantly reminds us, we may have been too quick in disposing of the opposition for descriptive and analytical purposes. It does not appear logical to argue for an essentialist view of African culture, which is the case when some extol hospitality and communalism as intrinsically African, and in the same breath refuse to place the blame on Africa and Africans for their inability to achieve political, economic and social stability. Again, as I will show, some view this inability as a form of resistance by Africans against external forces. What is illogical about such essentialist views of course is the rather a-historical assumption that societies and cultures are self-contained entities subject to no external influences and, even worse, likely to degenerate once they come into contact with the outside world.

Tradition and modernity matter. A useful discussion of humanism in Africa must engage with these concepts. To put it differently, only a clear identification of what in African life is a clear manifestation of the presence of traditional or modern elements will pave the way for an analytically coherent discussion of humanism in Africa. Ironically, Africa's history, especially the role of colonialism and to a lesser degree, developmental aid, has been crucial in placing humanism at the centre of African attempts to define a place for itself in the concert of world societies and cultures. Indeed, my claim is that humanism in Africa, just as Africa itself (cf. Macamo 1999), is a very modern construct. In other words, African humanism is the product of the manner in which Africans responded to the gauntlet of history by seeking to make sense of their worlds. In the process, they made their worlds anew. The much exalted "*Ubuntu*" philosophy in South Africa, for example, is in very important respects not so much the revelation of an essential cultural truth as a critical intellectual repositioning of Africans vis-à-vis their ambivalent experience of modernity (Macamo 2005).

## Africa and Humanism

The idea of humanism in Africa faces a paradox. On the one hand, there is a tendency to stress the humanity of African ways of life, based as they have been assumed to be, on generosity, hospitality, communalism and a profound respect for human life. Key political philosophies in the course of the struggles for emancipation from colonial rule and oppression repeatedly emphasized these aspects. While Julius Nyerere (Nyerere 1968), Tanzania's first post-colonial leader, sought to communalize the roots of a moral a

political order for his country, Kenneth Kaunda (Kaunda 1976), Zambia's first post-colonial leader, believed to have found in mutual aid and respect principles of African humanism which, like Nyerere's *Ujamaa*, would underpin his society's moral and political order. Several versions of "African socialism", from Leopold Sédhogo's (Sédhogo 1964), Modibo Keita's of Mali to Ahmed Sekou Touré's of Guinea Conakry<sup>1</sup> insisted on the idea that African ways of life had innate humanist qualities which could be harnessed to buttress the political order.

On the other hand however, the dominant perception of Africa in the world, particularly the perception informed by the images conveyed by the global media, is that of a continent with a very tenuous relationship to any notion of humanism whatsoever. The preference for news reporting on Africa which refuses to seriously engage with the logic of social action on the continent, opting instead for simplistic accounts based on such ideas as (a;) African political elites are self-serving, (b;) Africans are not interested in developing themselves, (c;) Africans are out to live off world compassion, (d;) Africans have, among other things, a different mentality – these only help to heighten the sense of a fundamental contradiction between Africa and humanism. The exploitation of this sense of contradiction can make best-sellers as a recent book published by a journalist in France purporting to discuss what it calls "*négrologie*" clearly documents (Smith 2003). Even serious publications have a hard time finding the right tone when coming to terms with what is going on across the continent as Achille Mbembe, one of the best African scholars, appears to be admitting his failure to find the right frame of mind to analyze or merely grasp what is going on (Mbembe 1992: 1-30).

Africa is indeed a continent characterized by cultures and societies which observe hospitality and solidarity to a striking degree, considering the increasingly atomized lives which modernity demands from individuals and societies. Hospitality and solidarity are particularly marked in rural areas. One may be tempted to explain the prevalence of these habits in rural areas with reference to the assumption that these areas are conservative by nature, and therefore, preserve original cultural forms. While the presence of cultural forms is a reliable indicator of their presence in the society in question, this might be just about all that can be said of hospitality and solidarity in African rural areas. More in line with the argument of this chapter is the assumption that African rural areas are the way they appear to be for reasons linked to their stronger propensity to what we might generally call traditional ways of life. In fact, hospitality and solidarity seem to have a conspicuous presence in many traditional societies. There are very good functionalist explanations for this, chief among which I could single out those provided by the German sociologist and social anthropologist, Georg Elwert (Elwert 1991). Elwert argued that reciprocity was central to the survival strategies of small-scale communities, especially in the absence of over-arching social

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1 | For a presentation of "African socialism" see Friedland/Rosberg 1967; for a discussion Babu 1981.

safety structures. In other words, much in the same sense in which Marcel Mauss had argued in his widely read *The Gift* (Mauss 1992), Elwert singled out these cultural forms as manifestations of a very specific type of society.

African societies do not elicit our admiration only on account of the preservation of positive traditional social forms. Also in the face of enormous adversity, especially in recent years, which expresses itself in the form of civil strife, vulnerability to natural disasters and precarious livelihoods, Africans appear to document humans' perseverance and attachment to life. In fact there is a sense in which Africa may be understood as the living example of what human nature is capable of under duress. Nothing that has happened in Africa in the context of adversity – from brutal violence to dogged pursuit of individual ends – is atypical of how others have reacted to similar situations in other parts of the world. The wars of the eighties and nineties in the Balkans as well as the so-called “war on terror” conducted by the US and its allies against religiously motivated violence have produced the kinds of human conduct which uninformed common sense would associate with the images of Africa privileged by mass communication means. That in spite of all the adverse conditions Africans come back again and again, bears testimony to their resilience, but also to their profound identity with the human condition.

This resilience has prompted scholars to look for ways of accounting for African social phenomena in terms of their relationship to what has been happening to Africans. An adequate appreciation of humanism in Africa will indeed have to come to terms with the context within which Africans have been looking for their bearings in the world. Accounts have tended to emphasize the extent to which African ways of life can be conceptualized as negative reactions to concrete historical circumstances. Indeed, while some see these ways of life as critical commentaries on modernity (White 2000), others see them as resistance against capitalism (Comaroff/Comaroff 1993), and still others speak of retrogression as in the case of James Ferguson (Ferguson 1999), who describes his own observations of the collapse of the world promised by copper in Zambia as an ethnography of decline. In so doing these accounts turn African initiative into a mere expedient reaction to circumstances that empty history of any substantive local content. The history of Africa becomes, strangely enough, a narrative of misunderstandings holding Africans hostage to the role of victims to themselves.

However, what these accounts miss is the very important point that amidst the general manifestations of resistance, criticism and decline, history is being made in Africa. In fact the history being made is not a history by default, as suggested by these accounts. Rather, it is real history, i.e. actually existing history, the actions and thoughts of Africans in their attempts at securing their existence and giving meaning to their lives. In a certain sense my argument should be understood as a critique of a historicist view of African life ways. This view pits African ways of life against an established historical horizon and that reduces history writing to a long drawn-out commentary on how Africa deviated from its pre-ordained path. My argument is informed

by an understanding of history based on the general idea of historicism, i.e. a theory of knowledge that engages with social action as it is as a document of itself.

Historicist ideas as opposed to historicism are not the privilege of external observers of the continent. Men and women who made history in Africa have fallen prey to them. The great *négritude* movement for example, the black African literary reaction against colonialism and for racial pride, dulled the cutting edge of its own critique by insisting on a timeless African history independent of what actually existed. Calls for a return to the roots made this clear. Curiously enough, the problem with *négritude* might not have been so much the insistence on racial and cultural essentialism as the inability to see the movement itself as the ineluctable historical process that is so central to social action. In other words, *négritude* was no accessory to Africans for them to return to their history, but rather yet another turn in African history, opening possibilities, widening agency and offering new and novel beginnings. In his celebrated introduction to the collection of *négritude* writings Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist philosopher, might have been the only one to have clearly grasped the historical significance of the movement. His image of the "Black Orpheus" (Sartre 1972) was not only an ethnocentric bow to the epistemological omniscience of Greek thinking and culture, but also, and more importantly, an acknowledgement of the historical significance of Africa's plight. Sartre described the movement as history gaining consciousness of itself. What he meant was that the suffering and oppression of Africans could only make sense to the extent that Africans were able to draw implications of worldwide significance. In other words, the French philosopher was arguing that Africans had become agents of history who had been entrusted with the task of redeeming not only the continent, but also the whole world. Africans, very much like the proletarians from whose Marxist conceptualization Sartre had drawn, suffered in order to impel history forward and deliver the world to its true promise.

While of course Sartre's Marxist reading of *négritude's* historical significance was historicist to a degree, he was drawing consequences from an understanding of African history which did not reduce social action to an artifact of a primordial culture desperately holding on to a world to which it did not seem to belong. He was actually adding a theory of knowledge to what Africans had been doing for several years, more particularly when returning slaves from America began thinking of Africa as a community of values and fate (see Macamo 1999). Sartre's understanding of the significance of *négritude* is consistent with the main thrust of the argument of this paper. Indeed, the argument can now be stated in a bolder manner: there is no such thing as an essential African humanism. That a culture values solidarity, hospitality and respect for others does not make it humanist in any theoretically acceptable way. Humanism in fact is a reflexive concept which implies that individuals engage critically with their own history and seek to draw lessons for the way they lead their lives. In this sense for instance, "*Ubuntu*" in and of itself is not a manifestation of any kind of primordial African humanism. However,

the thinking activity that went into bringing aspects of the black peoples of South Africa together to form a coherent critique of their historical experience is. In other words, African humanism comes to fruition in the manner in which Africans engage with their own historical experience and seek to draw lessons thereof. For a better understanding of this argument it is necessary to take a cursory look at crucial moments in the development and evolution of Africans' engagement with their experience.

## Africans' Dialogue with History

The most appropriate moment to start from is the point in time when a considerable number of former slaves from America start returning to Africa. These men and women contributed with their thinking to posit Africa as a *sui generis* category, to paraphrase the Nigerian scholar, Abiola Irele (Irele 1975). In so doing they set in motion a historical process which lends itself to being understood as the making of humanism in Africa, a humanism born of the experience of slavery, colonialism, racism and the struggle for human dignity. Two points will be at the centre of this account. The first point consists in the argument according to which the search for Africa (see Diawara 1998) plays a central role in forming humanist ideas in Africa. This can be hopefully demonstrated by drawing from the understanding that returning slaves in Liberia and Sierra Leone in West Africa towards the end of the nineteenth century brought to bear on their own condition. Secondly, the formation of humanist ideas was profoundly dependent on the elaboration of the idea of Africa, which came to stand for a community of values and destiny. On this score it is possible to link up with central pragmatic concepts<sup>2</sup> such as *African personality* or, for that matter *négritude*, which perceptive observers like the Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako (Bediako 1995). have traced back to the condition of the possibility of an African nation as experienced by returning slaves.

The background to this account is a debate on African philosophy. This debate opposed two sides within the African intellectual community. On the one side of the barricades there were scholars such as the Rwandan historian and linguist, Alexis Kagame and, to a certain extent, the Ugandan theologian John Mbiti, who argued for an African *Weltanschauung* which summed up a specifically African philosophy. Their position had a pedigree which reached back to the writings of missionaries, such as the Belgian Placide Tempels – who wrote “La philosophie bantoue” (Tempels 1945) – the German anthropologists Jahnheinz Jahn and Leo Frobenius, who in different but convergent ways thought that they had identified the true African self. Placide Tempels, for example, argued that this philosophy was based on the

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**2 |** The notion “conceptual pragmatists” refers to one specific understanding of philosophy within Africa which holds that philosophy is a universal intellectual pursuit concerned with conceptual clarification.



idea of a *life force*. The *négritude* movement took up these ideas and used them to argue, as Senghor forcefully did, that Africans were fundamentally different from Europeans: “Reason is Greek, emotion is black”, said Senghor to the cheers of Europeans who denied reason to Africans.

On the other side of the line stood philosophers such as the Ghanaian Kwasi Wiredu, the Nigerian P. Bodunrin and the Beninois Paulin Hountondji who insisted that philosophy was much more than a collection of folklore and mores. Some of them came to be known as “conceptual pragmatists” for insisting that what defined philosophy was respect for the universal rules of reasoning upon which that intellectual activity was based. By way of illustrating this point reference could be made to two arguments. Kwasi Wiredu, for example, took exception to an anthropologist, Robin Horton, who had argued that African traditional religion could be seen as a kind of science on a par with Western science (Horton 1960: 50–71, 155–187). In a polemical article with the title “How not to Compare African Traditional Thought with Western Science” (Wiredu 1984), Wiredu argued that African traditional thought was traditional thought much in the same way that traditional thought could be found in every society, including Western society. Wiredu felt that comparing this type of thought with science was rendering a disservice to the advancement of scientific thought in Africa. He singled out Senghor and criticized him for his remarks on reason being Greek wondering whether by that the great Senegalese poet and statesman might not have wanted to prove his point. Paulin Hountondji, on his part, rejected the idea of an African philosophy on the basis of what he felt to be an attempt to posit a kind of *unanimism* which in his view was lacking in Africa (Hountondji 1983).

The deeper one delves into the debate, the more one comes to understand that it was not just about establishing whether there was an African philosophy. One can actually see it as a debate about Africa itself. In other words, philosophers were reflecting upon what it meant to be African. It was an act of introspection and a necessary one at that. Indeed, the debate could be seen as the third stage of a long process of constituting Africa as a community of values and a community of destiny. In the study from which I draw this account (cf. Macamo 1999), I identified three main stages, namely a religious stage, a political stage and a cultural/philosophical stage. I believed, and still believe, that through these stages Africa was constituted as a modern construct. Humanism is intimately linked to this historical process.

The political stage consisted in the struggle for self-determination. It stretched from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century all the way to the 30-year period covering the sixties and the eighties – with the first independences which culminated with the end of white supremacy rule in South Africa. In this political stage Africa was defined as a political community under foreign rule. The slogans of the time were “Pan-Africanism” – there were Pan African congresses in Paris, San Francisco and Manchester. The most famous phrase of the time was Nkrumah’s “seek ye first your political kingdom, all else will

follow.” This was the time of political ideologies such as African socialism, Ujamaa, Conscientism and Humanism (in Kaunda’s understanding). The political stage articulated what had been simmering historically. It gave practical substance to Africans’ efforts to engage with history by seeking to bring about the conditions which would enable them to recover their human dignity. In the process however, many, especially the intellectuals, realized that they were not recovering an essential Africa. Rather they were constructing a new Africa fashioned on their existential experience.

Therefore Africa is in a sense a recent phenomenon. It came into being in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This may sound objectionable, since received wisdom would hold that the continent has existed for as long as anyone can remember. Africa as a continent inhabited by black folks, was known already in antiquity. However, the sense in which Africa should be understood as a recent phenomenon refers to the way in which the continent was the outcome of historical struggles of an ideological, political and philosophical nature. More substantively though, the sense in which Africa can be understood as a recent phenomenon is linked to the manner in which it was the outcome of people becoming aware of their existential condition and responding actively to it. They referred to what was already there, engaged with it and in the process, they molded something new: Africa.

The recent nature of Africa can be seen clearly in the travails of returning slaves who settled on the West African coast – Liberia and Sierra Leone. These were people who had been sold into slavery by their own brethren or by Europeans and subjected to the most inhuman treatment that men have inflicted upon one another, both on the way to as well as after arriving in America. These people came into contact with Christianity, learnt and accepted its message of redemption and equality before God. They wondered why such a benevolent and forgiving God could have allowed such a fate to fall upon them; exactly the theodicy question which Weber identified as being at the root of ethical frameworks.

The answer to this existential question was the first stone in the construction of Africa. While feeling that slavery was inhuman, they did not see it as a curse. They saw a larger purpose behind it. They saw slavery as the work of providence. Kwame Nkrumah summed this up nicely in a speech held in Liberia in 1952:

I pointed out that it was providence that had preserved the Negroes during their years of trial in exile in the United States of America and the West Indies; that it was the same providence which took care of Moses and the Israelites in Egypt centuries before. “A greater exodus is coming in Africa today”, I declared, “and that exodus will be established when there is a united, free and independent West Africa [...]” (Nkrumah 1973: 153)

God had allowed these men and women to be sold into slavery so that they could learn Christianity and a new ways of life. These men and women were destined to liberate their brethren from the darkness they had lived in

up until then. Most of the writings of the time are full of biblical imagery. Slavery is seen as the exodus and the return to Africa is the return to the Promised Land. Slaves were the “chosen people”, in fact Edward Blyden, one of the most vigorous writers of the group, even went as far as to argue that Africa as a whole had been chosen by God to liberate the world. This is the argument that would be taken up later, albeit clad in Marxist terminology, by Jean-Paul Sartre, who argued that history had chosen the black man to lead the way into all men’s emancipation. Even the naked people they encountered in the African hinterland symbolized, in the eyes of former slaves, the state of innocence Africans were still in.

To the extent that the search for Africa was concerned with redeeming the continent, its people and the rest of the world, it contained within itself the seeds of humanism in Africa. But what was this Africa that they were supposed to redeem and how were they going to do it? This Africa did not exist, yet it did. It did not exist in the sense of a politically, economically and socially coherent territorial community. Africa was a collection of fragmented polities, each pursuing its own interests and worshipping its own deities. Alexander Crummell, an Episcopalian minister who had settled in Liberia and a powerful spokesperson of the returned slaves for example, went as far as to say:

Africa is the victim of her heterogeneous idolatries. Africa is wasting away beneath the accretions of moral and civil miseries. Darkness covers the land and gross darkness the people. Great social evils universally prevail. Confidence and security are destroyed. Licentiousness abounds everywhere. Moloch rules and reigns throughout the whole continent, and by the ordeal of Sassywood, Fetiches, human sacrifices and devil-worship is devouring men, women, and little children. The people of Africa, [...] have not the Gospel. They are living without God. The Cross has never met their gaze [...] (quoted in Appiah 1992: 35)

Yet, Africa existed as a promise, as a community ready to be called into being. It fell upon those God had chosen to lead their brethren – former slaves – to identify the commonalities that would show them the way. Crummell’s contemporary, E. W. Blyden, (quoted in Mudimbe 1988: 110) wrote:

It is the feeling of race – the aspiration after the development on its own line of the type of humanity to which we belong. Italians and Germans long yearned after such development. The Slavonic tribes are feeling after it. Now nothing tends more to discourage these feelings and check these aspirations than the idea that the people with whom we are connected, and after whose improvement we sigh, have never had a past, or only an ignoble past – antecedents which were ‘blank and hopeless’, to be ignored and forgotten.

Race was a central element of this nascent African nation in the minds of returned slaves. In fact they have been strongly criticized by Kwame Appiah, an African philosopher of Ghanaian origin on, for example, their “racism” and “racialism” (Appiah 1992). Indeed, their most powerful justification for

an African nation was this common notion of race. They were so concerned about the purity of this notion that they were frightfully bigoted about anything in between, which is why they would call former slaves of mixed race “mongrels”. Race was important, but so was a shared history of suffering and a yearning for “improvement”, as they often put it.

As the chosen people they were to be the go-between for Europeans and their black and pagan brethren. Hence Blyden’s passionate invitation to freed slaves in America to come and claim their land. In the run-up to the Berlin conference, which took place from 1884 to 1885, for example, they still kept the hope that Africa’s future might be entrusted to them. It was in fact the Berlin conference coupled with the realization that Europe meant to avail itself of Africa’s riches that paved the way for the radicalization of their discourse, culminating in the political stage that I mentioned earlier.

In concluding this section it can be said that Africa was understood as a community of values and also as a community of destiny. Former slaves were to nurture it as part and parcel of the mission which God, in his infinite wisdom, had entrusted upon them.

Humanism in Africa was profoundly linked to the attempt at finding a place for Africa within an adverse historical process. Returning slaves lent substance to this understanding by defining Africa in a very specific way, namely as a community of values and destiny. What led them to this was their existential condition. This was the result of historical forces that fell upon the continent from the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

Elsewhere I argue that Africa is a modern phenomenon (Macamo 1999). This is because it emerged as a community of values and destiny out of a conscious dialogue between people and their own situation. Indeed, if reflexivity is an intrinsic part of modernity then Africa is a particularly poignant example of that. A Swedish political scientist, Björn Wittrock (Wittrock 2000: 31-60), has defined modernity as a set of promissory notes waiting to be cashed in. Africa as a modern construct resulted from the attempt by a very specific group of people, the returned slaves, to make modernity live up to its promise of liberty, progress and justice. It gained texture from the way in which these people engaged with their surroundings.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have been concerned to claim that a proper appreciation of humanism in Africa requires a conceptual framework which is still in need of development. My suggestion is that humanism in Africa is deeply related with the conditions under which Africa took shape as a community of fate and values. In other words, drawing from my earlier work on the philosophical debate concerning the issue as to whether there is an African philosophy, I submit that just as Africa is a modern construct, the fate of humanism in Africa is coupled with the historical conditions of the possibility of Africa as a modern construct. Indeed, humanism is what remains. Perhaps what

should remain – once all the fallen bodies throughout the course of history have been counted.

To be sure, this is not a conclusion. Rather it is an indication of the kinds of conceptual, theoretical and analytical paths which discussions of humanism in Africa should take. It is a statement of work to be done. This work should engage in a more vigorous manner with African life ways and tradition with a view to understanding their precise relationship. Not everything that is African is traditional, but a clear understanding of tradition might caution us against light hearted conclusions about the relationship between humanism and African life ways. Equally important is the worthwhile attempt at understanding discussions of the nature of African society as can be found in several writings of very influential anthropologists, missionaries and travelers. The writings of Leo Frobenius, Jahnheinz Jahn, Placide Tempels, David Livingstone and others are crucial to such an enterprise. They lie at the root of subsequent and more recent attempts at recovering the essence of African life ways. These writings were not inconsequential, and for this reason they deserve to be read and discussed at length as part of the efforts to appreciate humanism in Africa. This appreciation should include a consideration of Africans themselves, some of whom have been briefly discussed in this paper, as part of the attempt to understand how they responded to the challenges of history.

Only such an endeavor can hold the promise of a clear understanding of humanism in Africa.

