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DISCURSOS POSTCOLONIALES ENTORNO A ÁFRICA.

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Ideology and the possibility of African political theory:

African Socialism and “ubuntu” compared

This article explores the lack of investigation into African political theory in the postcolonial period. After discussing the epistemological problems in the study of African political thought, the paper then adopts Michael Freeden’s methodology for the analysis of political ideologies. Through this approach a comparison is made between African Socialism and ubuntu. African Socialism – as developed by Cabral, Nkrumah, Nyerere and Senghor – is defined by its core commitment to freedom from colonialism, to African culture, its promotion of communitarian equality and a belief in the transformative power of the state. Ubuntu – in the political version developed in post-apartheid South Africa, and promoted by Thabo Mbeki and Desmond Tutu – instead emphasises the collective and spiritual character of African society and the distinctively African character of ubuntu ideology. By comparing these two examples, we seek to explore the possibilities and problems which the discipline of African political theory faces in the postcolonial period.

Ideology, African Socialism, Ubuntu.

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THE PROBLEM OF AFRICAN POLITICAL THEORY

The study of African political thought has occupied a rather marginal position on the academic landscape, featuring prominently neither within the field of African Studies nor being frequently discussed as illustration of broader debates within political theory. This presentation thus aims both to carry out an analysis of African political theory, and to explore the different factors which have made the study of this discipline a problematic task. To do this, we must begin by reflecting on the very nature of political theory and the fact that “at the centre of what most contemporary academics regard as political theory” is the related discipline of political philosophy¹. This is especially problematic in the African context, as it leads us to the “problem of African philosophy”; a problem which “arises directly from a way of thinking about the nature of philosophy” in Africa profoundly affected by the impact of the colonial experience².

It is evident to most observers now that the dichotomies created by colonial discourses in Africa profoundly shaped both the academic study of the continent and its political landscape well into the postcolonial period. Investigating African political theory then, requires us to reflect upon the “dualism in colonial thinking”³ which, I will argue, prevented the emergence of a unified African political theory by dividing African politics into two separate spheres: a traditional one – populated by traditional authorities whose political thought (“folk-philosophy”) was best studied through anthropology – and a sphere of modern politics – where Western theories and disciplines, including philosophy, could be employed.

Colonialism, we must remember, was not only “a new historical form” in its economic and political dimensions, it was also an intellectual project, a “colonizing structure”, which introduced “the possibility of radically new types of discourses on African traditions and cultures” which furthermore, until the early twentieth century, were “consistent with the...socio-political expression of conquest”⁴. This was most visible in anthropology, which “developed models and techniques to describe the “primitive” in accordance with changing trends within the framework of the Western

¹ Michael Freeden, “Ideology, Political Theory and Political Philosophy” in G. F. Gaus and C. Kukathas (eds), *Handbook of political theory*, (London:Sage,2004), pp.3-17

² Valentin Y. Mudimbe, and Kwame Appiah, “The impact of African studies on philosophy” in R.H. Bates, V.Y. Mudimbe and J. O’Barr (eds), *Africa and the disciplines: The contribution of research in Africa to the social sciences and the humanities*, (Chicago:University of Chicago,1993), pp.116-117

³ Frederick Cooper, “Modernizing bureaucrats, backward Africans and the development concept” in F. Cooper, and R. Packard (ed), *International development and the social sciences : Essays on the history and politics of knowledge*, (London:University of California Press,1997), p.65

⁴ Valentin Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa: Gnosis, philosophy, and the order of knowledge*, (Bloomington:Indiana University Press,1988), pp.1-2

experience”⁵. This preoccupation with the primitive had political implications –the creation of the system of indirect rule – and intellectual ones, in the creation of “two opposed cultural universes: on the one hand a primitive...essentially, neophobic; and, on the other hand, an advanced, civilized mentality”⁶.

These dichotomies – primitive vs. civilised, traditional vs. modern, African vs. European – directly shaped academic knowledge and political discourses well into the ‘post-colonial’ period, creating a clear and strong tension between ‘indigenous’/‘African’ and ‘external’/‘Western’ ideas and discourses⁷. When nationalist movements began challenging colonial rule after World War II, they often also rejected colonial discourses and created intellectual alternatives whose inspiration came from different sources: their leaders’ European education, “Black American ideology, and Marxism”⁸, and also “African traditional political values and ideas”, which colonialism had fallen “considerably short of annihilating”⁹. These ideologies were, I will argue in this article, new forms of African political theory.

These formulations of African political theories and their academic study, have however remained influenced by the colonial perception that African society and politics were divided into two separate spheres, and by the tension generated by these ideologies’ simultaneous appeal to pre-colonial African values, and their use of Western concepts. This has had a number of consequences: first is the centrality of the ‘African identity’ and the autochthony of ‘African knowledge’, and the attempt to define these, and assert their relevance.¹⁰ Secondly, African political theory has been affected by the disruptive character of the colonial experience. Thus, in many ideologies pre-colonial Africa – for colonialists a “Hobbesian picture” – has been idealised as a “Golden Age of perfect liberty, equality and fraternity”¹¹. This “intellectually reconstructed world without sin” has become central to numerous African ideologies and, due to its static character, given these discourses a markedly utopian character¹².

Thus, colonial dichotomies have affected the study of African political theory, making this discipline appear hampered by an incompatible relationship between its

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.17,83

⁶ Mudimbe and Appiah, “The impact of African studies”, p.118

⁷ Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*, (Oxford:James Currey,1986), p.94; Kwasi Wiredu, “African philosophy in our time (Introduction)” in K. Wiredu (ed), *A Companion to African Philosophy*, (Oxford:Blackwell,1995)

⁸ Mudimbe, “The invention of Africa”, p.88

⁹ Ali Mazrui, “Ideology and African Political Culture” in T. Kiros (ed) , *Explorations in African Political Thought: Identity, Community, Ethics*, (New York:Routledge,2001), p.98

¹⁰ Kwame Appiah, *In my father's house: Africa in the philosophy of culture*, (New York:Oxford University Press,1992); Achille Mbembe, “African Modes of Self-Writing”, *Public Culture*, 14(1)(2002), pp.239-273; wa Thiong'o, “Decolonising...”

¹¹ Hodgkin in Mudimbe, “The invention of Africa”, p.1

¹² W. A. Mullins, “On the Concept of Ideology in Political Science”, *The American Political Science Review*, 66(2)(1972), pp.498-510, p.505

African and Western components. By adopting Michael Freeden's approach to ideology and political theory, we seek to reconceptualise African political theory as occupying a *single*, well defined, space between the empirical study of politics and the more abstract sphere of philosophical enquiry¹³. This will allow us to acknowledge the existence of various African and Western influences, but to see these not as an impediment to the emergence of African political theory, but as different elements – defined by specific historical, cultural and political contexts – which need to be located *within* African political theory.

AFRICA AND THE DISCIPLINES: FREEDEN'S ANALYSIS OF IDEOLOGY

Given the plurality and complexities of the African continent this article cannot attempt to provide neither a general description of 'African ideology', nor an overview of all the ideologies existing in Africa. Instead we will limit ourselves to a comparison of two examples: African Socialism and *ubuntu*. Although these are both examples of African ideologies – in that they seek to “recommend political conduct directly or, indirectly, to make others adopt conduct-evoking thinking through the shaping of legitimate language” – they are very different in many other aspects¹⁴.

These differences highlight the importance of adopting a broad methodology which will make a comparison possible – and can subsequently also be applied to other ideologies across the continent. To do this, we will rely on Michael Freeden's conceptualisation of ideologies as “the sphere in which political theory as a discipline can find its rationale”. Freeden argues that any successful analysis of political theory cannot be limited to a philosophical deconstruction of individual political concepts, because concepts in political theory get their meaning “from the idea-environment in which they are located”. Political concepts relate to each other in different ways, creating distinctive configurations; these configurations are ideologies: the “inevitable macroscopic consequence of attributing such meanings to a range of interrelated political concepts”¹⁵. Freeden's insight not only revitalises the study of ideologies, but also requires that political theory recognises the social environment in which political concepts are formed, in order to reclaim “its rightful place in the extensive area that exists alongside political philosophy and empirical political analysis”¹⁶.

¹³ Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, (Oxford:Clarendon Press,1996) p.132

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.105

¹⁵ Freeden, “Ideologies and political theory”, p.131, p.73, p.4

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.132

Freeden's analysis of ideology utilises "a three-tier formation: the components of a concept, a concept, and a system of concepts". Seeking to guide political action, ideologies act as systems of concepts "through which specific meanings, out of a potentially unlimited and essentially contestable universe of meanings, are imparted to a wide range of political concepts", a process labelled "decontestation"¹⁷. Political concepts in turn, "consist of both ineliminable features and quasi-contingent ones". Liberty, for example, has as an ineliminable feature the notion of non-constraint, but there are other concepts "logically adjacent" to non-constraint: "autonomy, self-determination, self-development and power"¹⁸. Logical adjacency is complemented by "cultural adjacency" – the "specific historical and socio-geographical phenomena that encourage the association of different political concepts, or smaller idea-units within a political concept" - in order to carry out the process of decontestation successfully. Cultural adjacency can act both as a brake "*within* the framework of logical adjacency" (say promoting autonomy over self-development), and by adding notions which "do not follow logically...but are regarded in ordinary usage as legitimate, if not indispensable" (making acceptable the idea of someone being "forced to be free" despite this being contrary to liberty's ineliminable feature of non-constraint). Through the interaction of logical and cultural adjacencies a political concept is ultimately decontested in order to link the "worlds of political thought and political action", the central function of ideologies¹⁹.

Michael Freeden's conceptualisation of ideologies as vehicles for political theory appears particularly useful in the African context. First, this approach allows us to analyse African Socialism and *ubuntu* as examples of African political theory without falling in the epistemological pitfalls which a narrower philosophical would generate. Second, Freeden's definition of ideology allows us to acknowledge "the impact of articulate and representative individuals", whilst contextualising them within broader "manifestation of group behaviour"²⁰. Thus, we will centre our attention on important individual contributions and their different influences, without losing sight of the broader historical context.

The next two sections will provide a detailed analysis of African Socialism and *ubuntu*. In each of them we will first provide a brief description of the historical context in which these ideologies emerged; then we will outline the "core", "adjacent" and "perimeter" concepts, and illustrate how these relate to their cultural and political contexts. A concluding section will point out the most important similarities between

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.54,75

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.61,68

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.71,72,76

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.106

these ideologies, and provide an assessment of the validity of Freeden's approach to the analysis of African political theory. Nevertheless, our conclusions will be rather tentative, as this investigation aims only to provide a first step in the study of African political theory. Successive analysis can either apply this approach to other ideologies within the African continent, or expand on these analyses of African Socialism and *ubuntu* by exploring how these ideologies have been articulated at the more general level of society.

AFRICAN SOCIALISM: HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND CONCEPTUAL OUTLINE

There were two main historical factors defining African Socialism: first was the loss of international legitimacy of the European colonies in Africa after World War II which, coupled with their dire financial situation, led Britain and France to an accelerated decolonisation across the continent²¹. Second was the onset of the Cold War and the increased polarisation between a communist East, a capitalist West and the new option of pursuing an independent policy –possible only after the Bandung Conference (1955) inaugurated the “Non-Alignment” movement²².

Diverse intellectual discourses also helped shaping the character of African Socialism. One first important influence was formal European education, closely associated with Christianity through missionary activity. Léopold Sédar Senghor (b.1906-d.2001) for example was marked by European anthropologists and Catholic thinkers such as Teilhard de Chardin²³. Furthermore, all the leaders upon whom this article focuses completed their education until university (something possible only by leaving the colonies), and this put them in contact with numerous intellectual influences. These ranged from Pan-Africanism, central to the thought of Kwame Nkrumah (b.1909-d.1972)²⁴, to European socialisms, not only Marxism – a central reference for Amílcar Cabral (b.1924-d.1973)²⁵ – but also Fabian socialism in the case of Julius Nyerere (b.1922-d.1999)²⁶.

²¹ Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940: the past of the present*, (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press,2002), p.64; Cooper, “Modernizing bureaucrats”, p.38

²² O.A. Westad, *The global Cold War: Third world interventions and the making of our times*, (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press,2005), pp.2-3

²³ J.L. Hymans, *Léopold Sédar Senghor: An Intellectual Biography*, (Edinburgh:Edinburgh University Press,1971), p.87; Mudimbe, “The invention of Africa”, p.88

²⁴ A.B. Assensoh, *African Political Leadership: Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah & Julius K. Nyerere*, (Malabar(Flo):Krieger Publishing,1998) p.71

²⁵ Patrick Chabal, *Amílcar Cabral: Revolutionary Leadership and People's War*, (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press,1983), p.41

²⁶ P. Idahosa, *The Populist Dimension to African Political Thought: Critical Essays in Reconstruction and Retrieval*, (Trenton(NJ):Africa World Press,2004), p.52

Yet, African Socialists were also influenced by values and ideas of the African societies to which they belonged²⁷. Although it is problematic to generalise, some authors have argued that one “most authentically indigenous of all the legacies of political thought” in Africa, is its “collectivist” character, “resting on a cumulative consensus, linking the past with the present and the future”²⁸. As we will see, this collectivist character is a fundamental piece of these leaders’ political thought. Also important is the fact that these leaders gained great popular support as leaders of nationalist movements. Nkrumah, Senghor and Nyerere became presidents of independent Ghana, Senegal and Tanzania respectively; the same would have occurred done Cabral, had he not been murdered²⁹. African Socialism was therefore characterised by a mix of intellectual influences as well as by the position of its theoreticians who despite belonging to a political and intellectual elite, they sought to translate their ideas into a popular ideology.

African Socialism’s first core concept is its demand for freedom for the African population – equated with the end of colonial exploitation and the assertion of African independence. In defining the concept of freedom however, African Socialists faced a crucial dilemma: on one hand, rejecting colonialism logically entailed a rejection of colonial boundaries; a position tentatively articulated in a series of short-lived political experiments – Senegal-Mali Federation (June-September 1960), Ghana-Guinea Union (1958-62), East African Community (1967-69)³⁰. At the same time however, these theorists were aware that freedom was most easily attainable via the direct transfer of sovereignty to the African majority through the existing political framework³¹. The somewhat ironical outcome of these conflicting impulses was that “‘African unity’ was becoming abstract at the very moment it seemed to be triumphant”; the desired Pan-Africanism was becoming one “of independent states, and it would prove an elusive goal”³². Despite their tension, both aspects of liberation are necessary components of the concept of freedom as understood by African Socialists. Pan-Africanism’s appeal was also a not only theoretical but resulted from these leaders’ personal experiences. Nkrumah, who played a central role in organising the successful Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester in 1945³³, demands in *Consciencism*: the “union of independent African states...a union integrated by socialism without which out hard-

²⁷ V. Stöger-Eising, “‘Ujamaa’ Revisited: Indigenous and European Influences in Nyerere’s Social and Political Thought”, *Africa*, 70(1)(2000), pp.118-143, p.118

²⁸ Mazrui, “Ideology and African Political Culture”, p.101

²⁹ Chabal, “Amílcar Cabral”, p.132

³⁰ Assensoh, “African Political Leadership”, p.74; Y. Benot, *Ideologias das Independências Africanas*, (Lisboa:Sá da Costa,1981), p.220

³¹ John Iliffe, *Africans: the history of a continent*, (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press,1995), p.248

³² Cooper, “Modernizing bureaucrats”, pp.80-81

³³ Assensoh, “African Political Leadership”, pp.87-88

won independence may yet be perverted and negated by a new colonialism”³⁴. Cabral also warns of the neo-colonial threat, although he his anti-imperialist perspective rests on a Marxist language, not on an explicitly Pan-African framework. For Cabral,³⁵ the major danger of decolonisation was that the nationalist liberation turned into a “neo-colonial case...[which] is not resolved by a nationalist solution; it demands the destruction of the capitalist structure”.

On Nyerere’s pragmatic approach to politics freedom meant firstly “national freedom...the ability of the citizens of Tanzania to determine their own future...without interference from non-Tanzanians”³⁶. Nevertheless, and as the Arusha Declaration shows, for Nyerere “the vision of a greater Africa in which the multiplicity would enrich union was never far from his mind”³⁷. Senghor’s position was similar but also a rather paradoxical one, for whilst he placed a great emphasis on racial liberation he nevertheless rejected a Pan-African project. His theoretical separation between nation – defined by culture/race – and the “territorial sovereign state on the pattern of Western institutions”³⁸ had important consequences. Senghor warned about “the “balkanization” of Africa into units too small to be economically viable”³⁹, but his emphasis on cultural freedom lead him to defend a confederalist solution between France and West Africa, rather than a direct independence from the metropole⁴⁰. This was not only a result of Négritude’s emphasis on cultural and racial awakening, but also of de Cardin’s ideas of the complementarity of races⁴¹.

This leads us to the second core concept of African Socialism: its affirmation of the distinctiveness and validity of African culture. This was in many ways was a direct reaction to the violence of colonialism, which had tried to make African people “believe we had no indigenous culture of our own; or that what we did have was worthless”⁴². Emphasising culture as a way of resisting colonialism and of affirming Africa’s identity was nevertheless problematic, as theorists sometimes sought to affirm Africa’s identity using ideas of culture shaped by colonial discourses⁴³.

³⁴ Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism: Philosophy and ideology for decolonization and development with particular reference to the African revolution*, (London: Heinemann, 1964), p. 118. Although containing important insights, Consciencism’s appeal has been lessened by Nkrumah’s desire to prove the validity of his philosophy through logico-mathematical reasoning (!)

³⁵ Amílcar Cabral, *Unity and Struggle*, (London:Heniemann,1980), p.133

³⁶ Julius Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism*, (Oxford:Oxford University Press,1968), p.25

³⁷ Julius Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity: Uhuru na Umoja*, (Oxford:Oxford University Press,1967), p.14; Stöger-Eising, ““Ujamaa” Revisited”, p.137

³⁸ Léopold S. Senghor, *On African Socialism*, (London: Pall Mall,1964), p.64

³⁹ Cooper, “Modernizing bureaucrats”, p.80

⁴⁰ Hymans, “Léopold Sédar Senghor”, p.173

⁴¹ Senghor, “On African Socialism”, pp.13,91

⁴² Nyerere, “Ujamaa”, p.186; Kwasi Wiredu, “Social Philosophy in Postcolonial Africa: Some Preliminaries Concerning Communalism and Communitarianism”, *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 27(4)(2008), pp.332-339, p.333

⁴³ Mudimbe, “The invention of Africa”, p.88

None of these theorists however, entertained the possibility of a simple return to a 'pure' precolonial Africa. These leaders recognised that at independence, most African societies contained multiple cultural legacies – the “traditional way of life...the presence of the Islamic tradition [and]...the infiltration of the Christian tradition and culture of Western Europe”⁴⁴. African Socialists therefore sought to integrate the values of African culture within their broader forward-looking ideology of African Socialism. Although they did not share a common definition of what African culture was, they nevertheless viewed it as “the essence and spirit of any nation”⁴⁵, and a central “factor of resistance to foreign domination”⁴⁶.

Interestingly, the two theorists who gave culture the most central role in their writings hold widely diverging understandings of it. Both Senghor and Cabral rejected the attempts at cultural assimilation which characterised Portuguese and French colonialism, and saw cultural and political liberation as closely linked⁴⁷. Senghor argued that “*cultural independence*, is the necessary prerequisite of other independences: political, economic and social”⁴⁸. Senghor defined the Negro-African “*civilisation*” (culture) as characterised by a “*reasoning-embrace*”, by “*participation and communion*”, notions which, he argued, “ethnologists specializing in the study of Negro-African civilizations have used for decades”⁴⁹. This understanding of culture was also marked by ideas of ‘cross-breeding’ and the need to “assimilate, not be assimilated”⁵⁰. Nevertheless, Senghor’s definition of African culture as opposed to European colonisation, ended up maintaining an essentialist vision of African culture which had been created and maintained by colonial anthropology.

Cabral also saw culture as an “element of resistance”, and considered that “national liberation is necessarily an *act of culture*”, but not because an identifiable African culture could be upheld against the European one⁵¹. Cabral’s concern with culture was not intellectual but practical: he believed that people’s cultural outlook affected how they related to the movement of national liberation. Cabral explicitly denied a common African culture because for him culture had a marked “class character”, even “when this category is or appears to be still embryonic”⁵². This invalidated the presupposition “that there can be continental or racial cultures

⁴⁴ Nkrumah, “Consciencism”, p.68

⁴⁵ Nyerere, “Ujamaa”, p.186

⁴⁶ Cabral, “Unity and Struggle”, p.139

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.140; Senghor, “On African Socialism”, p.165

⁴⁸ Senghor, “On African Socialism”, p.69; Hymans, “Léopold Sédar Senghor”, p.153

⁴⁹ Senghor, “On African Socialism”, pp.74-75

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.165

⁵¹ Cabral, “Unity and Struggle”, p.141,143

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.149

because...culture develops in an uneven process”⁵³. The potential of African culture therefore did not derive from its homogenous character, but from the way in which different cultures were all marked by the experiences of the people as a colonised class. It would be only through the process of liberation, and not through any intellectual investigation, that the “progressive definition of *national culture*” would emerge⁵⁴.

Although these two concepts are not unique to African Socialism; in this ideology these are complemented by a third core concept that gives this ideology a distinctive character: its commitment to an egalitarian society⁵⁵. Although African Socialism sought an “equality of opportunity and the narrowing of the gulf between the privileged and the underprivileged”, economic equality was also not important *per se*, but because it was representative of the communitarian ethos dominant in traditional African societies⁵⁶. This communitarian ethos plays a multiple role: first, it gives African Socialism a “socioeconomic” character which sets it apart from “sociocultural” ideologies like Pan-Africanism⁵⁷. Second, it helps conveying the moral dimension of African Socialism which emphasises humanist values and the need to restore a moral community destroyed by the violence of colonialism. Finally, in appealing to the ethos of precolonial Africa, these theorists sought to distinguish African from European Socialism; in doing this however, they relied on an idealised and static image of precolonial Africa which gave this ideology a utopian dimension⁵⁸.

African Socialists conveyed the image of precolonial egalitarianism most directly through the assertion that idea of class, understood in the Marxist sense, “was non-existent in African society”⁵⁹. Although there was conflict and “social groups struggling for influence”, these had not yet become fully formed classes⁶⁰. Even Cabral, who often used a Marxist language, criticised the orthodox view that the class struggle was the “motive force of history”. For him it was the “dominant mode of production” – and not the class struggle – which constitutes the motor of history. To argue the opposite would mean that non-European societies “were living without history or outside history at the moment when they were subjected to the yoke of imperialism”⁶¹. For African Socialists however, precolonial equality was not simply a result of economic organisation, but the consequence of the existing communitarian ethos. The socialism of precolonial Africa

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp.144,149

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.147

⁵⁵ Friedland and Rosberg, “African socialism”, p.8

⁵⁶ Colin Legum, “The Goal of an Egalitarian Society” in C. Legum and G. Mmari (eds), *Mwalimu: The Influence of Nyerere*, (Oxford:James Currey,1995), p.186

⁵⁷ Mazrui, “Ideology and African Political Culture”, p.97

⁵⁸ Mullins, “On the Concept of Ideology...”

⁵⁹ Nyerere, “Freedom and Unity”, p.11; Nkrumah, “Consciencism”, p.69

⁶⁰ Senghor, “On African Socialism”, p.87

⁶¹ Cabral, “Unity and Struggle”, pp.123,124

was “essentially and basically a *socio-ethical* doctrine, not economic”⁶²: “an attitude of mind”, as Nyerere put it⁶³. An attitude of mind which places the community at its core; as Senghor writes: “Negro-African society puts more stress on the group than on the individual, more on *solidarity* than on the activity and needs of the individual, more on the *communion* of persons than on their autonomy. Ours is a *community* society”. This does not imply that a “community society ignores the *person*”, but rather that any person “feels, thinks that he can develop his potential, his originality, only in and by society, in union with all other men”⁶⁴.

By using the classless character and communitarian ethos of precolonial Africa as the foundation for African Socialism, this ideology presents itself as radically different from European socialism. African Socialism, writes Nkrumah, is “not a development from capitalism”, it is “the defence of the principle of communalism is a modern setting”⁶⁵. African Socialism for Nyerere is both “opposed to capitalism, which seeks to build a happy society on the basis of the exploitation of man by man; and...to doctrinaire socialism which seeks to build its happy society on a philosophy of inevitable conflict between man and man”⁶⁶. These leaders recognised that colonialism had transformed the continent, but they still believed that African societies were different from European ones, and that it was possible to maintain this difference. As Cabral argued, the sequence of pre-capitalist, capitalist and socialist stages dictated by European history was “not indispensable”: there was the possibility of “a *leap* in the historical process”⁶⁷ which would not only avoid the exploitation that capitalism would entail for African societies, but it would also reassert “African history...recapture [it], from colonial usurpation”⁶⁸. A reassertion which would also help mending the moral community of African societies ravaged by colonialism: “with true independence regained”, Nkrumah writes, “a new harmony needs to be forged. A new emergent ideology is therefore required ...which will not abandon the original humanist principles of Africa”⁶⁹.

Using an image of precolonial Africa to define African Socialism had however, important consequences. Firstly, its emphasis on the communitarian ethos, displaced individual liberty and autonomy to the “margin” of African Socialism – making these

⁶² Kwame Gyekye, *The Unexamined Life: Philosophy and the African Experience*, (Accra:University of Ghana,1997), p.25

⁶³ Nyerere, “Freedom and Unity”, pp.1,2,11,12

⁶⁴ Senghor, “On African Socialism”, pp.93-94

⁶⁵ Nkrumah, “Consciencism”, p.73

⁶⁶ Nyerere, “Freedom and Unity”, p.12

⁶⁷ Cabral, “Unity and Struggle”, p.126

⁶⁸ Idahosa, “The Populist Dimension to African Political Thought” p.188

⁶⁹ Nkrumah, “Consciencism”, p.70

“intellectually and emotionally insubstantial”⁷⁰. Secondly, it contributed to the utopian character of African Socialism⁷¹. These theoretical tensions were not explored by these authors, but helped shaping how this ideology translated into specific political decisions, often with negative consequences.

In exploring this translation of theoretical ideas into political practice, it is imperative that we recognise the importance of African Socialists’ commitment to a state-led development discourse⁷². The importance of this discourse resulted from different factors, including colonial legacies, the international idea-environment, and the congruence between this discourse and some of African Socialism’s core ideas. By committing themselves to this development discourse however, these theorists failed to recognise the practical limitations which they faced as leaders of independent “gatekeeper states”⁷³, and showed an unwarranted – even utopian – faith in the transformative potential of the state.

The limitations of the postcolonial state are nicely captured on the expression that “African states were successor in a double sense”⁷⁴. First, there was a structural/institutional legacy which placed political leaders on a very precarious position, often unable to exert direct authority over their territory. Thus, while leaders sought a transformation of “the economic relations between men, and...of the economic structures themselves”⁷⁵, their position in power depended on the maintenance of these very same economic structures – for example the groundnut-producing Muslim marabouts in Senegal. But African states were successors in a second sense: in their adoption of the development project, African Socialists took over “the interventionist aspect of the colonial state, and intensif[ied] it, in the name of the national interest”⁷⁶. A vision – encouraged by the international idea-environment of the time – characterised by a belief in “the power of science and technology”, and by a depiction of the state as the “the natural instrument for social change and betterment”⁷⁷.

It was Tanzania that tried most directly to translate the core ideas of African Socialism into specific policies. Nyerere’s vision was one of “development of the people...by the people...for the people”, in which peasants would lead the country’s

⁷⁰ Freeden, “Ideologies and political theory”, p.78

⁷¹ Mullins, “On the Concept of Ideology...”

⁷² Cooper, “Modernizing bureaucrats”; Michael Jennings, “‘We Must Run while Others Walk’: Popular Participation and Development Crisis in Tanzania, 1961-9”, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 41(2)(2003), pp.163-187

⁷³ Cooper, “Modernizing bureaucrats”, p.157

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.156

⁷⁵ Senghor, “On African Socialism”, p.101

⁷⁶ Cooper, “Modernizing bureaucrats”, p.156

⁷⁷ Michael Jennings, “Building better people: Modernity and utopia in late colonial Tanganyika”, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 3(1)(2009), pp.94-111; p.107; Cooper, “Modernizing bureaucrats”, p.88

development in consonance with the principles of *ujamaa*⁷⁸. Although Tanzania succeeded in mobilising efforts towards rural transformation – for example through the Ruvuma Development Association (RDA) – it was, ironically, this popular eagerness that led to a “perceived ‘development crisis’”, as peasants’ efforts seemed to move “beyond the control of both the central and local agents of state authority”; a crisis swiftly resolved as the state took over *ujamaa* villages⁷⁹. Thus, and despite his commitment to African Socialism, Nyerere’s vision remained within the “developmental paradigm erected by the colonial authorities” in which in which “development needed, above all, to be planned and directed” by the state⁸⁰.

African Socialists’ commitment to the state was also consistent with their vision of the state as representative of the whole community, and as a suitable vehicle for the promotion of economic and political development⁸¹. Similarly, the preference for a single-party was also theoretically justified, as this was perceived as the best vehicle for the construction of national unity and the promotion of consensual democracy – the “essence of democracy”, as practised in precolonial Africa⁸². Some of these arguments are indeed theoretically valid (other philosophers have since defended this alternative⁸³), and thus, the authoritarian character eventually adopted by African Socialist states could be said to result less from these leaders’ democratic theories than from their belief that the state should control political competition and their lack of attention to the emerging interests of the bureaucratic class. In ignoring emerging class interests and avoiding the question of how, from the present sociological and political context, “the good society might be more nearly approximated”, African Socialism showed a clear utopian character⁸⁴. These leaders’ desire to affirm the future by denying the colonial past made them reliant on images of precolonial Africa which were markedly static and non-historic⁸⁵. These images gave African Socialism an utopian dimension –interestingly mirrored in the static vision of the future embraced by a colonial development discourse “focused on an endpoint, not [on the] process of moving forward from a constrained but dynamic present”⁸⁶. Thus, African Socialism was not an empty discourse which simply aimed to justify the power exercised by

⁷⁸ Nyerere, “Freedom and Unity”, p.26

⁷⁹ Andrew Coulson, *Tanzania: A Political Economy*, (Oxford:Oxford University Press,1982), pp.263-270; Jennings, “We Must Run while Others Walk”, p.185

⁸⁰ Jennings, “We Must Run while Others Walk”, pp.182,184

⁸¹ Nyerere, “Freedom and Unity”, p.82; Senghor, “On African Socialism”, p.99

⁸² Charles Andrain, “Democracy and Socialism: Ideologies of African Leaders” in D. Apter (ed), *Ideology and Discontent*, (London:Collier MacMillan,1964) pp.199-200; Nkrumah, “Consciencism”, pp.100,101; Nyerere, “Freedom and Unity”, p.196

⁸³ Wiredu, “African philosophy in our time”

⁸⁴ Mullins, “On the Concept of Ideology...”, p.506

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.504

⁸⁶ Cooper, “Modernizing bureaucrats”, p.71

these. African Socialism was a complex ideology shaped by various intellectual influences and by the specific historical and cultural context in which it emerged. Inspired by the past, African Socialism demanded freedom for the continent, asserted the value of African culture, conveyed a vision of an egalitarian society, and sought to restore a moral community in the wake of the violent colonial experience.

UBUNTU: HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND CONCEPTUAL OUTLINE

Ubuntu emerged at a historical context defined by the demise of the apartheid regime in South Africa and by the changes triggered by the end of the Cold War. South Africa's dismantling of apartheid regime and its substitution by a multi-party political system in the 1990s, was a model transition that made the country— and its President, Nelson Mandela – political and moral examples for the rest of the world. This was related to the end of the Cold War, as the collapse of the Soviet Union removed an important justification for the apartheid regime, which presented itself as resisting the Communist threat of the African National Congress (ANC)⁸⁷. The West's 'victory' in 1989 also ushered in a period in which liberal democratic capitalism appeared as the only feasible system of political and economic organisation. This last aspect shaped the "bargained" character of the transition in South Africa where political control by the black majority was accompanied by an economic liberalisation which allowed the continuity of white corporate capital's interests⁸⁸.

Both *ubuntu* and African Socialism then, emerged at critical historical junctures in which African societies freed themselves from colonial exploitation. This gave these ideologies a number of common themes: both presented themselves as explicitly African alternatives, differentiating themselves from Western models by placing an important emphasis on the community; and both ideologies sought to provide normative guidance for the future development of these countries. Despite these commonalities, African Socialism and *ubuntu* differ in terms of their historical context and idea-environment, as well as in how these ideologies have been articulated. For *ubuntu*, reclaiming a distinct identity has been more complicated since a radical economic programme could not be promoted in South Africa given the compromises of the post-apartheid transition and the global consensus. It is also complicated, and perhaps unnecessary, for *ubuntu* to directly challenge liberal democracy and human

⁸⁷ Robert Wilson, *The politics of truth and reconciliation in South Africa: legitimizing the post-apartheid state*, (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press,2001)

⁸⁸ E. Webster and G. Adler, "Toward a Class Compromise in South Africa's "Double Transition": Bargained Liberalization and the Consolidation of Democracy", *Politics and Society*, 27(1999), pp.347-385; R. Southall, "Opposition in South Africa: Issues and Problems" in R. Southall (ed) , *Opposition and Democracy in South Africa*, (London:Frank Cass,2001) pp.1-24

rights discourse given that this has often been a language “of pragmatic compromise, seemingly able to incorporate any moral or ideological position”⁸⁹.

Differences also emerge in how *ubuntu* has been articulated. Whereas African Socialism was developed solely by political leaders, *ubuntu* has emerged through the contributions of academics, politicians, religious leaders, etc who often subscribed to very different intellectual perspectives⁹⁰. Whilst this has made *ubuntu* less likely to be monopolised by the state than African Socialism, it has also made this ideology less coherent, thus making it difficult for *ubuntu* to be directly translated into specific policies, and contributing to a lack of definition of its theoretical core which leaves this ideology open to very different political articulations.

Two important obstacles appear when adopting a political theory analysis of *ubuntu*. The first is that *ubuntu* has been articulated in diverse spheres of South African society (management consultancy, education, psychology...), often not related to politics. Secondly, in most contributions the actual “meaning of *ubuntu* is not made clear in any formal way”⁹¹; to convey its meaning, authors instead employ illustrations from everyday life, provide a list of different values which *ubuntu* entails, or simply outline the different areas of life where *ubuntu* can be experienced⁹². There is however, a central idea which appears in all definitions of *ubuntu*; this is contained within the Zulu maxim *Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu*⁹³. Although this aphorism cannot be literally translated into English, most interpretations give it a meaning along the lines that: ‘a person only becomes fully human through his/her interaction with others and the recognition of their humanity’⁹⁴.

This core concept contains two ineliminable components which give *ubuntu* a distinctive character. First, the recognition that “man is basically a social being” and that the realisation of a person’s potential requires his/her integration within society and

⁸⁹ Wilson, “The politics of truth and reconciliation in South Africa”, p.5; Ramose, “African Philosophy Through Ubuntu”, p.195

⁹⁰ Ramose, “African Philosophy Through Ubuntu”; Thabo Mbeki, *4th Annual Nelson Mandela Lecture by President Thabo Mbeki: University of Witwatersrand* (2006) [Online] Available at <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2006/0607311151005.htm> [Accessed 23 April 2009]; Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, (London:Rider Books,1999)

⁹¹ M. Wewerinke, “Human Through Others: Ubuntu – Towards a critical, participatory debate”, University of Pretoria LLM thesis (2007), [Online - pdf], Available at <http://www.socsci.ru.nl/maw/cidin/bamaci/scriptiebestanden/641.pdf> [Accessed 29 March 2009], p.28

⁹² Respectively Samkange and Samkange, “Hunhuism or Ubuntuism”, pp.35-36; Tutu, “No Future Without Forgiveness”, pp.34-35; L. Teffo, “Moral Renewal and African Experience(s)” in M. W. Makgoba (ed), *African Renaissance: The New Struggle*, (Cape Town:Mafube Publishing,1999), pp.155-161

⁹³ Ramose, “African Philosophy Through Ubuntu” p.52; Augustine Shutte, *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa*, (Pietermaritzburg:Cluster,2001), p.23; D.J. Louw, “Ubuntu and the Challenges of Multiculturalism in post-apartheid South Africa”, *Quest*, XV(1-2)(2001), pp.15-36, p.15; G.M. Nkondo, “Ubuntu as public policy in South Africa: A Conceptual Framework”, *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies*, 2(1)(2007), pp.88-100, p.89

⁹⁴ This is my own personal rendering of *ubuntu* constructed from the different definitions provided by the literature.

the interaction with other people⁹⁵. For *ubuntu* then, the social nature of man is tied to the recognition of the importance of the community, a collectivist dimension also present in African Socialism. There are however differences: for African Socialism the importance of the collective was related to its egalitarianism, a dimension largely absent from *ubuntu*. A second ineliminable component is the moral and spiritual implications derived from recognising the centrality of the community. *Ubuntu* is not inherent to any society for the simple fact of being a (Southern) African society; it needs to be promoted by individuals and society alike for their mutual development⁹⁶. The *ubuntu* understanding of community furthermore emphasises the role of the ancestors, whose presence is central for stabilising the community. These strong religious or quasi-religious connotations, sometimes tied to a Christian perspective, imply a recognition that the “African conception of life includes both the physical and the spiritual”.⁹⁷

Once we have identified the first core concept of *ubuntu* (“Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”) and its two ineliminable components – its collectivist and spiritual dimensions – it becomes clear that *ubuntu* aims to present itself as an African ideology. This distinctively African character constitutes the second core concept of *ubuntu*; articulated in different ways. Firstly, *ubuntu* distinguishes itself from Western discourses contrasting its spiritual character with those “strands in Western Humanism [which] tend to underestimate or even deny the importance of religious beliefs”, and highlighting its emphasis on the community as opposed to Western individualism⁹⁸. Secondly, *ubuntu* is distinctively African because it considers itself as being derived directly from an “indigenous philosophy”⁹⁹. This creates certain instability within the *ubuntu* core because it requires this ideology to demarcate the boundaries where it can be applied: for some, *ubuntu* is a specifically Southern African, even South African, philosophy¹⁰⁰, for others it is a broader African philosophy which can support a Pan-African orientation¹⁰¹.

This tension is not necessarily a flaw – for an ideology’s core can often not provide a total harmony on a theoretical level¹⁰². Resolving these tensions requires however, the interaction between the core the adjacent and perimeter concepts of

⁹⁵ Prinsloo, “*Ubuntu* culture and participatory management”, p.43; Shutte, “Ubuntu...”, p.23

⁹⁶ Tutu, “No Future Without Forgiveness”, p.36; Shutte, “Ubuntu...”, p.24

⁹⁷ Louw, “Ubuntu and the Challenges of Multiculturalism...”, pp.17-18; Ramose, “African Philosophy Through Ubuntu” p.64; Shutte, “Ubuntu...”, p.22 Michael Battle, “A Theology of Community: The *Ubuntu* theology of Desmond Tutu”, *Interpretation*, 54(2)(2000), pp.173-182, p.180

⁹⁸ Louw, “Ubuntu and the Challenges of Multiculturalism...”, p.17; Shutte, “Ubuntu...”, p.26; C. Marx, “Ubu and Ubuntu: on the dialectics of apartheid and nation building”, *Politikon*, 29(1)(2002), pp.49-69, p.60

⁹⁹ Samkange and Samkange, “Hunhuism or Ubuntuism”, p.103

¹⁰⁰ Van Binsbergen, “Ubuntu and the globalisation...”

¹⁰¹ Ramose, “African Philosophy Through Ubuntu”; E.K. Bongmba, “Reflections on Thabo Mbeki’s African Renaissance”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30(2)(2004), pp.291-316

¹⁰² Freeden, “Ideologies and political theory”, p.417

ubuntu – defined by the political context. Within *ubuntu* furthermore, adjacent and perimeter concepts are expected to play a greater role given that there are only two concepts defining its core, and the plurality of voices shaping the definition of *ubuntu*. Two factors which also make it likely that various articulations of this ideology may emerge. Given that we cannot simply choose one formulation and present it as the ‘real’ formulation, nor we can analyse all different formulations, we will opt for analysing two of the most important and complete articulations of *ubuntu*.

In the first example, located within the context of the post-apartheid transition and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), *ubuntu* has been articulated – most visibly by Archbishop Desmond Tutu – as an ideology of reconciliation and multi-racial nation-building¹⁰³. Reconciliation was a crucial goal for South Africa after apartheid, as recognised in the postscript to the 1993 Interim Constitution – in which *ubuntu* first appears in a political-legal document¹⁰⁴. This Constitution declared a general amnesty to those responsible for politically motivated crimes but accompanied this decision by reconciliatory mechanisms like the TRC (established in late 1995)¹⁰⁵. The TRC Chairperson, Desmond Tutu, established a link between *ubuntu* ideology and the need to “balance the requirements of justice, accountability, stability, peace and reconciliation” in post-apartheid South Africa¹⁰⁶. Tutu rejected both a Nuremberg-style trial, and a “blanket or general amnesty”. Instead, he promoted a ‘third way’: the “granting of amnesty to individuals in exchange for a full disclosure relating to the crime for which amnesty was being sought”. An alternative “consistent with a central feature of the African *Westanschauung*...– what we know as *ubuntu*”¹⁰⁷. For Tutu *ubuntu* “speaks of the very essence of being human...It means that my humanity is caught up, inextricably bound up, in theirs”; thus the forgiveness granted by apartheid victims to their oppressors in the TRC, is not only a selfless gesture: “it is the best form of self-interest”¹⁰⁸.

Whilst this striking conclusion is logically consistent with the core of *ubuntu*, it is also powerfully influenced by Tutu’s Christian beliefs. For Michael Battle, “Tutu’s role as national confessor operates from a distinctively theological model of forgiveness in which human identity depends on a trinitarian image of God. Not to forgive assumes there is no such image of God among humanity...not to forgive assumes no future for South Africa”¹⁰⁹. What is important, is not to discuss whether this Christian influence

¹⁰³ Tutu, “No Future Without Forgiveness”; Battle, “A Theology of Community”

¹⁰⁴ “Constitution of the Republic of South Africa- Act 200 of 1993”

¹⁰⁵ Wilson, “The politics of truth and reconciliation in South Africa”, pp.7,8

¹⁰⁶ Tutu, “No Future Without Forgiveness”, p.27

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.24-34

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.34-35

¹⁰⁹ Battle, “A Theology of Community” p.174

discredits *ubuntu* as a 'real African' notion, but to reflect on how Tutu's articulation of *ubuntu* appears through the interaction of different concepts, and becomes politically relevant within the context of the TRC¹¹⁰. For *ubuntu* to function as an ideology of nation-building however, a specific understanding of the nation is also needed. This has been possible in post-apartheid South Africa because the here 'Rainbow Nation' is "constructed in an opposition between the present self and the past other...not naturalized by reference to its ancientness, but in its affirming of the uniqueness of the present"¹¹¹. Affirming that South Africa's "only future as a nation is located in a multicultural and multiracial territory" is not merely an appeal for tolerance, it means that without this multiracial character there will be no nation¹¹².

The second influential articulation of *ubuntu*, associated to South African ex-President Thabo Mbeki, has seen this ideology being used to emphasise the differences between African society and the dominant Western/global one. In this interpretation *ubuntu* has adopted a continental orientation – linked to the idea of an 'African Renaissance' – and a cultural character –related to the role of traditional authorities. Whilst this Africanist reading of *ubuntu* reflects the potential of the "emancipatory moment" which accompanied the end of apartheid¹¹³, it is also clear now that this potential has not been realised by the policies of the South African government.

Mbeki first mentioned the African Renaissance in 1997, at a corporate summit in the USA. There, he linked South Africa's "miracle" transition to a "new political order" in the whole of Africa – a link already made a year earlier in his famous "I am an African" speech – which is a powerful "sub-narrative" of the post-apartheid transition¹¹⁴. Very briefly, two different readings of the African Renaissance can be highlighted. The first, from an international relations perspective, sees the Renaissance as South Africa's attempt to lead the continent's integration into the global world – through economic initiatives such as the New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), and a more assertive foreign policy towards the continent – an involvement which has caused tensions as other African countries saw this as a "Pax Pretoriana"¹¹⁵.

¹¹⁰ Others have also argued for *ubuntu* to become central to "the ongoing political process of nation-building" – Shutte, "Ubuntu...", p.194. For a critique of this see, Wilson, "The politics of truth and reconciliation in South Africa", pp.10-11; Marx, "Ubu and Ubuntu", pp.50-54; Van Binsbergen, "Ubuntu and the globalisation...", p.76. For a positive reading of the role of the TRC see William Beinart, *Twentieth Century South Africa (New Edition)*, (Oxford:Oxford University Press,2001), p.345

¹¹¹ Wilson, "The politics of truth and reconciliation in South Africa", p.16

¹¹² Nkondo, "Ubuntu as public policy in South Africa", p.93

¹¹³ P. Vale and S. Maseko, "South Africa and the African Renaissance", *International Affairs*, 74(2)(1998), pp.271-287, p.282

¹¹⁴ Bongmba, "Reflections on Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance", p.291; Vale and Maseko, "South Africa and the African Renaissance", p.271

¹¹⁵ Bongmba, "Reflections on Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance", p.297

The second reading of the African Renaissance is “post-structural”, making a call for a reinterpretation of African “history and culture, away from its colonial construction”, and aiming to challenge the “dominant narratives of international relations, and open a space in which alternatives views of Africa’s future may be advanced”¹¹⁶. It is within this reading that we find an articulation of the *ubuntu* discourse. Makgoba for example, sees the Renaissance as characterised by a “humanistic engagement that reflects African ideas such as ubuntu, which stress community identity” and which can help to “launch an ethical engagement that seeks to avoid war by tapping into African moral values to deal with conflict”¹¹⁷.

Mbeki has also articulated an Africanist interpretation in the domestic sphere, calling for *ubuntu* to become a central element of South African society. This has been done this in two different ways: first, he has emphasised the need to “infuse the values of Ubuntu into our very being as a people”¹¹⁸. Values which would address the “spiritual needs” of the people, halt the “atomistic and individualistic” tendencies of society and prevent the market from becoming “the principal determinant of the nature of our society”¹¹⁹. Integrating *ubuntu* “into the national consciousness” would entail a rejection of the profit-first individualistic ethos emphasised by Western neo-liberalism. In his second articulation, Mbeki has sought to differentiate South African society from the Western model through “the preservation and promotion of our cultures and customs, which promote the values of Ubuntu”¹²⁰. He has emphasised the “role of traditional leaders in development and in promoting the...well-being of our communities”, although he has also highlighted the need for changes, such as giving women a more important role. Thus, for *ubuntu* to become an important aspect of South African politics, it is necessary to preserve “key African pre-colonial constructs of governance”, which would contribute to “deepen our democracy and enrich the humanism of our contemporary and evolving society”¹²¹.

Mbeki’s Africanist articulation of *ubuntu* – based on the adoption of African values and institutions – may define this ideology and guide political developments in different ways. Mbeki’s call for “social cohesion and human solidarity” in the face of capitalism can be translated, as some commentators have done, into a policy prescription for expanding the “role of the state as a public agent” and the adoption of

¹¹⁶ Vale and Maseko, “South Africa and the African Renaissance”, pp.280-281

¹¹⁷ Bongmba, “Reflections on Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance”, pp.298-300

¹¹⁸ Mbeki, “4th Annual Nelson Mandela Lecture”

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Thabo Mbeki, Address at the annual opening of the National House of Traditional Leaders: Houses of Parliament, Cape Town (2007) [Online] Available at <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2007/07022313151001.htm> [Accessed 29 March 2009]

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

“ubuntu redistribution policies”¹²². Judging the record of Mbeki’s government, and its commitment to neo-liberal policies, it is clear that this articulation has not been adopted by the state. This formulation remains possible however, but only as a critique of the government’s failure to “deliver greater social justice”. Second, Mbeki’s link between *ubuntu* and traditional institutions can be seen as a critique of the one-size-fits-all model of liberal democracy. This is important if one agrees that any model of democracy for Africa needs to understand the “cultural preconditions of both political will and economic competence”¹²³. *Ubuntu* may become here a “creative ideology” helping “the consolidation of the collective identity” and of democracy in South Africa¹²⁴. Again, whilst this articulation may be emerging in the academic sphere¹²⁵, it has not informed government decisions beyond the adoption of specific policies such as the *Izimbizo* “initiative to take Government to the people”¹²⁶.

	Core Concepts	Adjacent Concepts	Perimeter/ Policy decisions
African Socialism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Freedom from colonial rule (national/ continental) African culture as resistance and identity Equality - embodied by precolonial communitarian ethos 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commitment to state-led development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Ujamaa</i> <i>Animation Rurale</i>
Ubuntu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu</i> (collective and spiritual aspects) Distinctive African Ideology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reconciliation/multi-racial nation building Continental and cultural orientation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> TRC ‘African Renaissance’ Traditional authorities

CONCLUSION

This communication has explored the possibility of analysing African political theory as a distinct area of enquiry, using as our main methodological tool Michael

¹²² Nkondo, “Ubuntu as public policy in South Africa”, p.95

¹²³ Mazrui, “Ideology and African Political Culture”, p.129; Claude Ake, *The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa*, (Dakar:CODESRIA,2000)

¹²⁴ Mazrui, “Ideology and African Political Culture”, pp.130-131

¹²⁵ J. Sindane, and I. Liebenberg “Reconstruction and the philosophical other: The philosophy and practice of *ubuntu* and democracy in African society”, *Politeia*, 19(3)(2000), pp.31-46

¹²⁶ Presidency of the Republic of South Africa, *Special Projects: Izimbizo* (n.d.) [Online] Available at: <http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/main.asp?include=izimbizo/main.html> [Accessed 29 March 2009]

Freeden's approach to ideologies and political theory. This has allowed us to locate the study of African political theory firmly between the empirical analysis of politics and the discipline of political philosophy, thus avoiding numerous epistemological obstacles. Through this method, we have compared African Socialism and *ubuntu*, not an unproblematic choice given the different historical contexts in which these ideologies have emerged. Nevertheless, the broad method developed here appears suitable for this comparison, and perhaps also for the analysis of other examples of African political theory. Through this approach, both ideologies appear as complex intellectual constructs, articulated by different individuals and shaped by numerous intellectual influences. They are not vacuous or simplistic ideologies which simply seek to justify the hold of power by some of these leaders. At the same time, this complexity warns us against trying to label them as either 'real African' or 'invented' ideologies. The goal of this article has been rather to identify the various influences, locate their core, adjacent or perimeter concepts, and explore how these concepts have been translated into policy decisions.

Thus, we can point out that both African Socialism and *ubuntu* emerged at critical historical junctures marked by the end of violent colonial/racist regimes. This can partly explain why both try to highlight their African identity and dissociate themselves from dominant Western models, while emphasising their moral dimension. In doing this both African Socialism and *ubuntu* have given a central importance to their collectivist orientation. This constitutes the most direct influence of an African tradition of political thought which, although perhaps over-simplified, should not be dismissed as a mere 'invention'. Despite this common emphasis – which presents important theoretical tensions between individual rights and the welfare of the community that we have not explored– African Socialism and *ubuntu* have understood this collective dimension as entailing very different things. Whereas African Socialism saw the communitarian ethos as requiring an egalitarian orientation for society, *ubuntu* has emphasised rather the spiritual dimension of the community. These are important differences crucially related to the specific historical and political contexts in which these ideologies have emerged.

African Socialism was developed by political figures, which allowed it to become articulated as a coherent blueprint for political and economic action. At the same time, their close relation to state power made African Socialists excessively utopian about the possibilities of state control, and eventually helped these countries' transformation into authoritarian regimes. By contrast, the diverse perspectives contributing to *ubuntu* and the more limited space available for state projects have made this ideology's political articulation less straightforward and has The indeterminate character of the

ubuntu core has also made possible the existence of different articulations. In these however, *ubuntu's* African character has been emphasised through its spiritual and cultural dimensions, rather than through a clear political and economic project, as African Socialism tried to do.

Overall then, our analysis of African Socialism and *ubuntu* has demonstrated that these are complex intellectual constructs, influenced by different voices and intellectual perspectives. Analysing African political theory thus, has also showed that the translation of different discourses into political decisions is shaped both by the internal structure of any ideology – relationship between different concepts – and by the specific political context, especially the relationship between an ideology and state power. Understanding African political thought appears essential for understanding African politics; something which requires us to affirm not only the possibility of African political theory, but its necessity.