Nativism and the Debate on African Public Sphere in Postcolonial Africa: Reflections on a Problematic ‘Reverse-Discourse’

Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni
Open University
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Abstract: Despite the fact that the phenomenon of nativism is noticeable in the narratives of African liberation thought right from Garveyism, Ethiopianism and Negritude to African Personality and African Renaissance, the dominant tendency among scholars has been to dismiss it as a catalogue of epistemological errors, as essentialist mystifications, as a masculinist appropriation of dissent, as reverse racism and as fatalistic populist millenarianism. This paper seeks to make historical sense of nativism within the context of colonial matrix of power and African search for public sphere founded on African values and serving African common concerns. Nativism was and is a problematic product of the immanent logic of settler colonialism and a contradictory but critical aspect of decolonization drive in Africa that cannot be easily dismissed as mere reverse racism. While exploring the emergence, antecedents, dynamics and contradictory manifestations of nativism, the paper also explores and critiques two dominant narratives of African historical experience namely postmodern cosmopolitan neo-liberal paradigm that has consistently bashed and disciplined nativism rather than explaining it and decolonization/liberatory school of thought that has remained uncritical of nativism. What is undisputed about nativism is that despite numerous dismissals, it has continued to pulsate and reverberate within postcolonial struggles over determination and control of public discourse, ownership of the state, indigenisation of economy, production of knowledge and taking control of the destiny of African societies, making it available for critical scholarly analysis and explanation. The Native Club in South Africa and the Third Chimurenga in Zimbabwe are analyzed and used as the most recent manifestations of nativism in Southern Africa in this paper.
Introduction

If a public sphere is not able to encompass people of different personal and group identities, it can hardly be the basis of democracy. If people have the same views, no public sphere is needed—or at least none beyond a space for plebiscites or ritual affirmations of unity… If a public sphere needs to include people of different classes, genders, even nations, it also requires participants to be able—at least some of the time—to adopt perspectives distanced from their immediate circumstances, and thus carry on conversations that are not determined strictly by private interest or identity.

Craig Calhoun (2002: 165)

Despite being shot through with internal inconsistencies, contestations, contradictions and ideological promiscuities, African nationalist struggles against colonialism sought deliver and reproduce African colonial ‘subjects’ as liberated ‘citizens,’ to achieve national self-determination, to remake colonies into sovereign nation-states, to initiate economic development beneficial to former colonised Africans, to install democracy, human dignity and human rights that were denied under colonialism (Mamdani 1996; Zeleza 2003). Seen from this perspective, African nationalism was a progressive force that cannot be simplistically dismissed as ‘shibboleths of discredited geographies and histories’ and purveyor of ‘primordial pathologies’ (Zeleza 2003: Preface). What was not progressive was colonialism that defined the colonial public sphere as a sacred site reserved for colonial white settler bourgeois group that drove colonial public discourse and ‘thought’ and ‘spoke’ on behalf of disenfranchised and subalternised African colonial ‘subjects.’ Under colonialism Africans were thoroughly and systematically de-oracised that is denied what Austin Bukenya described as ‘productive oracy’ that ‘entail self-definition, self-assertion, negotiation of relationships, claiming of rights, and indictment of their violation’ (Bukenya 2001: 32; Zirimu & Bukenya 1977). De-oracisation of Africans was a logical part of colonialism’s denial of Africans access to the colonial public sphere that was protected by strong halls of race and racialised conceptions of citizenship (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2001: 53-83; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2006: 1-18). Since colonial conquest, definition of African destiny fell into the hands of colonial masters and the public discourse was shaped and determined by colonial imperatives rather than African concerns and interests.

Ideally this meant that African nationalist struggles against colonialism became partly concerned with the push for African access to the public sphere if not for imagination and creation of new social sites and spaces within which Africans as citizens could get together to
freely deliberate on matters of common concern and to take control of their destiny. But in reality, the post-colonial African state as a product of the nationalist struggle continuously manifest a terrible proclivity towards destroying emerging vibrant public sphere. The post-colonial African ruling elite have often demonstrated machinations to close the emerging public sphere rather than to widen it and support it flourishing. Kuan-Hsing Chen argued that ‘the contemporary moment of the (ex-) colonies is still one of a process of decolonisation, and in at least three connected but convolute forms: nationalism, nativism, and civilizationalism’ (Chen 1998:1). Africans are still struggling to regain lost identities together with fighting to take control of their destiny within a global environment governed by invisible snares of colonial matrix of power. What exists as the public sphere in Africa continues to exhibit the indelible in-print of colonialism and mimicry of western values that are now re-packaged as global values. The public sphere is infused with intellectual formulations coming from the (ex-) imperial centres rather than African values, concerns and interests. It is within this context that Africans fall back on nativism as they continue to resist the forcible confinement of their history, values and identities to the barbarian margins of the world. Nativism becomes one way in which Africans are trying to take control of the public sphere so as to publicly articulate their common concerns. The difficult question to answer is whether nativism is the right alternative to be used by Africans to push for vibrant public sphere in post-colonial Africa. The second challenge is that nativism’s compatibility with liberal and modern democratic institutions remains vague. The African struggle for vibrant public sphere must of necessity be focused on ‘domestication’ of liberal democracy, making it serve the interests of the citizens rather than remaining elitist to the extent of being accused of sustaining colonial and apartheid economic structures.

But what is this public sphere? The German sociologist Jurgen Habermas defined public sphere as a ‘sphere where private people come together as public and discuss matters of common concern’ and this site is ‘governed neither by the intimacy of the family, the authority of the state, nor the exchange of the market, but by the ‘public reason of private citizens’ (Habermas 1989: 27). Habermas understood the importance of this sphere in the context of the classical liberal revolutionary transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe together with the concomitant emergence of the bourgeois as a revolutionary class critical of monarchical rule based on heredity and religion. In broad terms, Habermas was concerned with the early development of liberal democracy that was linked to the rise of bourgeois class in Europe and the discourses of enlightenment that underpinned modernity (Peters 1993:
The sad reality is that Africa experienced the ‘darker’ side of modernity that unleashed forcible Christianization, mercantilism and the slave trade, imperialism, colonialism and apartheid instead of liberty, fraternity and human rights (Mignolo 1995). A coalescence of these ‘negatives’ of modernity culminated in the birth of what Mahmood Mamdani described as bifurcated colonial states that segregated its population along racial lines into ‘citizens’ and ‘subjects’ (Mamdani 1996). This colonial set-up of the state had far reaching consequences not only for the nature of African response to colonialism but also on the redeployment and reconfiguration of African public sphere and the overall structuration of post-colonial political communities. Craig Calhoun defines public sphere as ‘an arena simultaneously of solidarity and choice’ and ‘a crucial site for the production and transformation of politically salient identities and solidarities—including the basic category and practical manifestation of ‘the people’ that is essential to democracy’ (Calhoun 2002: 165).

This paper seeks to reconceptualise the public sphere as not only a site for rational discourses, debates and decision-making but also as a sphere within which issues of identities continue to be contested and deployed in particular ways. Within this sphere ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ identities continue to contest each other as the making and re-making of the African world progresses (Calhoun 2002: 163). ‘Thin’ identities cascading from globalisation and cosmopolitanism are amenable to normative universalism while ‘thick’ ones are products of nationalism and nativism and are amenable to localism and historical context (Calhoun 1997). Therefore, nativism is part of those discourses that favour ‘thick’ over ‘thin’ identities and cannot be sidelined in the debate on public sphere in Africa. Because African identities are still in the making in such countries as Zimbabwe and South Africa, the public sphere is also in the making if not being re-imagined from different perspectives including nativist one. Differences of identities and particularities of interest continue to shape imaginations of the public sphere in Africa. At the centre of the public sphere are contestations that are unfolding along the fault lines of those operating within the postmodern/cosmopolitan camp vis-à-vis those in the nationalist/decolonisation liberatory camp. This paper therefore re-examines those historical processes that coalesced to produce particular kinds of liberation ideologies and discourses including nativism and a particular kind of the African public sphere that mirrors and reflects its conception and birth at the confluence of colonialism and African nationalism. These key historical processes that shaped the evolution of African public sphere range widely from dawn of modernity that unleashed complex colonial encounters and such other broader processes of mercantilism, colonialism, capitalism, nationalism, neo-liberalism,
globalisation and cosmopolitanism whose embers are continuing to burn provoking various responses across the human globe.

In organisational terms, the paper is divided into three broad sections: The first section introduces the genealogy of two competing epistemologies one founded on Western modernity and pushing the transnational society bourgeois project of emancipation within which Africa is represented as a catalogue of ideological deficiencies and epistemological errors that can only attain salvation by copying everything from the North. In this discourse which harks back to enlightenment together with echoes of bourgeois culture and ideas, African national and local solidarities particularly nativism are denigrated as backward, outmoded and impositions of the past on the present (Calhoun 2002: 147-149). The other is founded on contesting colonial modernity and pushing the agenda of African liberation from the snares of colonial matrix of power. While these epistemologies are not mutually exclusive, a delineation of the key aspects of each make it easier to understand the logic behind the consistent dismissals of nativism within the neo-liberal cosmopolitan post-modernist narratives of African historical experiences and the affirmation of and sympathy for nativism within the African liberationist paradigms that are contesting coloniality in Africa.

Key debates on the public sphere are characterised and influenced by the neo-liberal post-modernist paradigm whose starting point of narration of the African story is Western modernity and its emancipatory agenda that uncritically accepted neo-liberal democracy as a global movement ‘into which African experiments are expected to fit’ without a contest (Osaghae 2005: 1). The key problem is this discourse as noted by Craig Calhoun is not only that of overemphasizing ‘thin identities’ as adequate underpinnings for democracy but also that of blind acceptance of ‘economistic, modernising imaginaries without giving adequate attention to the formation of solidarity and the conditions that enable collective choices about the nature of society’ (Calhoun 2002: 148). This neo-liberal cosmopolitan post-modernist paradigm is sweeping if not fundamentalist in what it claims and annihilatory in what it rejects which includes nativism and Afro-radicalism that contests global colonial hegemony. This paradigm is being contested by liberationist approach whose starting point of narration of the African story is contestation of coloniality in its various disguises and accommodates nativism and Afro-radicalism as it consistently potholes coloniality and pushes for the ‘next liberation’ after the failure of the first and second phases of liberation. This liberationist
paradigm is currently at its formative phase and is antagonising under the heavy weight of triumphant neo-liberalism and globalisation as it struggles to creatively combine national, democratic and social justice questions into a single new democratic consensus that is simultaneously ranged against global colonial hegemony and local/domestic authoritarianism and oppression (Shivji 2000; Shivji 2003; Mafeje 1995).

The second section traces the roots of nativism to the immanent logic of colonialism and how it became an inevitable part of African liberation discourse. From Octave Mannoni (1950); Frantz Fanon (1952); Albert Memmi (1957); Frantz Fanon (1963); Ashis Nandy (1983); Ngugi wa Thion’o (1986) right through to Mahmood Mamdani (1996) and Achille Mbembe (2001) the issue of the epochal impact of colonialism on the African mind and on the invasion of African imagination has been emphasised. The psychology and praxis of colonization had devastating impact on the evolution of African political consciousness including imaginations of liberation. Kuan-Hsing Chen has concluded that ‘colonialism is not yet a legacy, as mainstream postcolonial studies would have it, but still a lively operator in any geocolonial site’ (Chen 1998: 34). Besides interpellation of its nemesis (which is African nationalism), colonialism also influenced the nature of the African public sphere in many ways as it shaped and constrained African imagination of liberation and ways of knowing. Nativism emerges from this milieu of the psychology of colonialism as a reverse-discourse seeking to subvert and undermine colonial ideologies through mobilisation of decentred African identity and culture (Parry 2004: 40).

The third section is dedicated to empirical examples of the Native Club in South Africa and the Third Chimurenga in Zimbabwe that reveal some of the key issues of the current conjuncture and how colonial matrix of power has continued to discipline any African imagination of the world that is out of sync with the norms and cannons of the triumphant neo-liberal world. This triumphant neo-liberal world is intolerant of any radical liberationist imagination of the world as it is concerned with defending, saving and maintaining the global status quo. Insurrectionist nationalism and nativism have re-emerged as part of African attempts to break out of the current crisis where radicalism has been disciplined into a mere fight for the status quo.

There is no way one can establish a deeper understanding of the evolution of African political ideologies, current nature of African political communities, configuration of African states
and their modes of political practice without a clear comprehension of the often hidden mechanics of the construction of a hegemonic ‘modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world system’ which the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano described as the colonial matrix of power underpinned by four interrelated tenets: control of economy; control of authority; control of gender and sexuality; and control of subjectivity and knowledge (Quijano 2007: 168-178; Mignolo 2007). The crisis of African liberation discourse is partly to do with what Quijano termed repression of alternative modes of knowing, of producing knowledge and of producing perspectives—a consequence of colonisation of the imagination of the dominated (Quijano 2007: 168-178). This reality also explains the existence of a very complex public sphere that is highly contested and dominated by overlapping civic, deviant, primordial and indigenous public associations made up of a bizarre assortment of labour, professional, intellectual, student, farmers, women, and ethnic groups, articulating overlapping forms of politics including those inspired by nativism (Ekeh 1992: 83-104; Ekeh 1975: 91-112; Osaghae 2006: 233-245). As argued by Eghosa Osaghae, the ambiguities and contradictions reflected in the African public sphere are in turn reflective of the deeper fractured social foundations of African politics marked by serious disjuncture between state and society giving birth to equally fractured and highly contested citizenship prone to retribalisation (Osaghae 2006: 233-245). Thus any fruitful analysis of nativism in its relationship to the public sphere must take into account Africa’s historical realities cutting across colonial and postcolonial periods together with global historical developments that directly and indirectly impinged on the evolution of politics and configuration of the state in Africa.

The questions that have remained problematic in the debate on nativism pertain to its stand in relation to the debates on the African public sphere. Does it stand as complementary or as an alternative? Is nativism standing as a hybrid having appropriated western liberal ideological resources to pose new questions related to identity in the debates on African public sphere and democratisation? These are indeed difficult questions to answer as nativism has so far revealed mainly its ugly face in terms of xenophobia and Afrophobia crystallising around issues of victimhood and suffering. It is the negative manifestations of nativism that has led Kwame Anthony Appiah to dismiss it in these words:

Railing against the cultural hegemony of the West, the nativists are of its party without knowing it. Indeed the very arguments, the rhetoric of defiance, that our nationalist muster are … canonical, time tested… In their ideological inscription, the cultural nationalists remain in a position of counter-identification…which is to continue to
participate in an institutional configuration—to be subjected to cultural identities they ostensibly decry… Time and time again, cultural nationalism has followed the route of alternative genealogizing. We end up always in the same place; the achievement is to have invented a different past for it (Appiah 1992: 56-57).

For a historian it is not enough to just dismiss a phenomenon that has emerged and that continues to reverberate and pulsate in current post-colonial African body politic. It is important to historicise and make sense of why nativism emerges in the format it does and make sense of what it represents across the colonial, decolonisation and post-colonial phases of African history.

**Two competing epistemologies and meta-narratives on Africa**

Walter D. Mignolo emphasised that ways of analysis and speaking are always influenced by analysts’ particular location in the power structures and that ways of knowing and perceiving the world are always situated (Mignolo 2000). For Africa, two dominant epistemic loci of enunciation of histories, discourses and developments are easily discernable though they are not mutually exclusive. The first is that which seeks to tell the story of Africa from the perspective of Western modernity and the interpretation of African history in analogous fashion. The second is that which begins the story of Africa from the perspective of coloniality and is linked to subaltern epistemic perspectives that are critical of Western philosophy’s claims to a single version of truthful universal knowledge (Mignolo 2000: 721-748). The first is broadly a narrative of the story of modernist emancipatory project whose starting point is enlightenment discourses that were opposed to feudal monarchs with their hereditary notions of power, the conservative churches with their privileging of beliefs over knowledge and superstition based on blind religiosity underpinned fear and ignorance. It is permeated through and through by bourgeois enlightenment intellectual thought, intellectual arrogance and celebration of violent conquest of Africa in such colonial euphemisms as ‘pacification,’ ‘civilising mission,’ ‘white man’s burden’ and ‘modernisation’ (Crong 1984; Rostow 1960; Roper 1965; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2001; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2006). This paradigm has assumed universalism and pretends not only to be universalistic but also to be a neutral and objective point of view. The second tells the complex and unfinished story of liberation from colonialism, neo-colonialism, neo-liberal imperialism and hegemonic globalisation. The story told from the perspective of Western modernity ‘lays claim to the homogeneity of the planet from above—economically, politically and culturally’ (Mignolo 2000: 721). It is
backed up by what Immanuel Wallerstein (1991: 1) termed the ‘nineteenth century social science paradigms’ that are consumed holus bolus in the African academy and have terribly influenced the entire African intellectual thinking. Commenting on the hegemonic influences of these paradigms, Wallerstein noted that:

It is quite normal for scholars and scientists to rethink issues. When important new evidence undermines old theories and predictions do not hold, we are pressed to rethink our premises. In that sense, much of nineteenth-century social science, in the form of specific hypotheses, is constantly being rethought. But, in addition to rethinking, which is ‘normal,’ I believe we need to ‘unthink’ nineteenth-century social science, because many of its presumptions—which, in my view, are misleading and constrictive—still have far too strong a hold on our mentalities. These presumptions, once considered liberating of the spirit, serve today as the central intellectual barrier to useful analysis of the social world (Wallerstein 1991: 1).

Nineteenth century social science paradigms installed what Walter D. Mignolo (2007: 159) terms ‘tyranny of abstract universals.’ This happened in tandem with unfolding of Western modernity and epistemological hegemony through denial of anything positive from Africa and pushing anything African to the barbaric margins. Ramon Grosfoguel well summarised this process in these words:

We went from the sixteenth century characterisation of ‘people without writing’ to eighteenth and nineteenth century characterisation of ‘people without history,’ to the twentieth century characterisation of ‘people without development’ and more recently, to the twenty-first century of ‘people without democracy (Grosfoguel 2007: 214).’

While Africa was represented as a catalogue of ideological deficiencies, the West was said to have progressed very well from the ‘rights of people’ in the sixteenth century to the eighteenth century ‘rights of man’ right through to late twentieth century ‘human rights’ (Grosfoguel 2007: 214). Quijano articulated the epistemological logic of colonial matrix of power in these words:

In the beginning colonialism was a product of a systematic repression, not only of specific beliefs, ideas, images, symbols or knowledge that were not useful to global
colonial domination, while at the same time the colonisers were expropriating from the colonised their knowledge, especially in mining, agriculture, engineering, as well as their products and work. The repression fell above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification, over resources, patterns, and instruments of formalised and objectivised expression, intellectual or visual. It was followed by the imposition of the use of the rulers’ own pattern of expression, and of their beliefs and images with reference to the supernatural (Quijano 2007: 169).

African intellectual and liberation initiatives have found it very difficult to ‘unthink’ the epistemologies created by enlightenment intellectuals and to ‘reproduce itself outside these relations’ (Quijano 2007: 169). The end product has been ‘scholarship by analogy’ that has pervaded some of the influential intellectual works in and on Africa (Mamdani 1996; Zeleza 1997). The current products of these epistemological narratives on Africa are two competing and sometimes overlapping imaginations of liberation namely neo-liberal postmodernist and the radical liberationist approaches. Osaghae summarized the key contours of the postmodernist cosmopolitan trajectory in these revealing words:

The first, which may be called the neo-liberal approach, is global and comparative in orientation, and evaluates on the basis of the extent to which African states have conformed with the precepts of liberalism, including liberal democracy, as determined by the post-Cold War global hegemonies. The key point in this approach is the projection of capitalism and liberalism as trajectories all societies have to go through, which is a refurbished version of the unilinearity of old-fashioned modernization. Good performers, which enjoy the support of the international community, are states that score highly on the evaluation scales such as the Quality of Democracy Index …and Africa Demos…while poor performers that suffer the opprobrium of the international community are those like Abacha’s Nigeria and Gadaffí’s Libya, that refuse to conform and for that reason, have low scores (Osaghae 2005: 14).

Osaghae contrasted this trajectory with another one he described as liberationist approach. This is how he put it:
The second, which we shall call the liberationist approach, is more discerning of the peculiar challenges facing the state in Africa, and instrumentalizes democratization and development. The accent on human rights, for example, is seen, not as a matter of democratic finesse, but as a weapon of weak and oppressed groups and classes struggling for emancipation and empowerment. Similarly, popular participation is measured by the extent to which civil society constituents play a determinate role in the reconstruction of the state based on a new social contract that binds the state to responsiveness, transparency and accountability, rather than the formalism of voting and being voted for in elections or forming pressure groups to make demands on the system (Osaghae 2005: 14-15).

The liberationist approach is under the constant policing eye of the postmodernist neo-liberal approach. If it is not dismissed it is disciplined. If it is not disciplined; its agenda is stolen, diluted and destroyed. But it has refused easy burial. Its resurrections have taken various forms such as insurrectionist nationalism, Afro-radicalism, cultural nationalism and nativism. All these resurrections are taking place within a terrain in which neo-liberal dispensation is assuming hegemonic proportions. This neo-liberal paradigm has since the end of the Cold War attained global outreach and continues to evaluate African experiences, successes and achievements in terms of how far they have ‘conformed with the precepts of liberalism, including liberal democracy, as determined by the post-Cold War global hegemonists’ (Osaghae 2005: 14). Osaghae has this to say about this neo-liberal approach’s evaluative criteria of African progress:

[...]criteria for evaluation usually includes the extent to which market reforms have been embraced, typically in terms of implementing SAPs even while doing so means pauperising the people and repressing popular forces; the extent to which the system has been opened up to pluralist and multi-party politics, regardless of whether or not anti-democratic structures remain firmly in place; the extent to which good governance, measured by constitutionalism, civil control of the military, popular participation, respect for human rights and rule of law, as well as transparency and accountability, has been entrenched (these of course have to be determined by so-called international standards); and the extent to which free and fair elections (as determined by international electoral observers and monitors) as well as orderly change of government are possible (Osaghae 2005: 14).
The decolonisation/liberatory approach is not opposed to democracy, rather it appropriates democracy and human rights tenets as weapons of the oppressed and the weak in its endeavour to push forward the frontiers of decolonisation into new horizons of economic empowerment, social justice and autonomous control of African destiny. In other words, democracy and human rights are combined with issues of identity in a drive to take control of the state by the progressive and popular forces who aim at re-configuring it for purposes of the developmental needs of the people rather than the elite. To the committed ‘popular and progressive’ forces, the postcolonial state is not yet an African political formation but a phenomenon imagined by colonial masters on the mirror of metropolitan Europe. Notwithstanding the reality that the African state has tried to resist the image of the metropolis assuming the character of a hybrid political formation that combined and incorporated both metropolitan frameworks and institutions and those of the African pre-colonial past, what is clear is that at independence, this state only changed hands between departing white bourgeois and incoming African bourgeois under which it remained serving the interests of global capital rather than the interest of the people of Africa. What is needed is for the people to capture the state and making it serve the interests of the popular masses rather than global capitalism (Nyong’o 1987:25).

One of the current difficult questions that continue to pulsate within the decolonisation/liberatory narratives of the African experience is that of finding legitimate people/groups to constitute genuine African popular forces endowed with people’s trust to appropriate the state for the good of masses. To those wedded into the neo-liberal/postmodern cosmopolitanism, the answer lie with the civil society as the fertile terrain embodying the popular interests of the people. However, Osaghae has raised concerns about the legitimacy of civil society as the embodying popular mass interests. First, he charges that civil society is a middle-class/elite project that does not approximate the broad range of popular forces. Second, the emergent civil society (as opposed to embedded one) is largely a creation of global capitalism that has continued to finance it in its concubinage with non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Third, NGOs are nothing but important agents of globalisations and Western hegemony in Africa. Finally, ‘civil society today does not have the national appeal and conviction that distinguished the anti-colonial alliances of the old’ (Osaghae 2005: 17).
While Osaghae’s arguments implied that civil society is not a legitimate embodiment of popular forces capable of delivering a people-sensitive state in Africa, Peter Ekeh tried to expand the conception of civil society in his four-fold typology of: civic public organisations (labour, professional and student associations, mass media); deviant civic organisations (secret societies, fundamentalist religious movements); primordial public associations (ethnic and communal associations); and indigenous development associations (farmers’ and traditional women’s associations) (Ekeh 1992: 187-212). The fragmentation of civil society into these various categories reflects the unique historical foundation of African experiences particularly the experiences of colonialism and nationalism. Mahmood Mamdani has emphasised the exclusionary character of colonial civil society founded on racial hierarchization of natives and settlers. Within this colonial set up, the excluded natives remained squashed into primordial sphere marked by ethnic categorisations. African nationalism and the anti-colonial struggle emphasised de-racialisation and Africanisation, rather than democratization. At the end of colonialism, ‘the more civil society was deracialised, the more it took on a tribalised form’ (Mamdani 1996: 15-21). It is important to add that civil society also took the form of nativism with the triumphalism of African nationalism being celebrated as conquest of the settler by the native.

While civil society is sometimes assuming the character of a site of exit for those disillusioned by the state to pursue parallel state activities, its relationship with the state remains complex. It is engaging the state not with a view to substitute it but to make it more open to pluralism and diversity. Michael Walzer (1991: 293-304) described civil society as constituted by associational networks within which civility is constructed that enables democratic politics to take place. Civil society exists mainly to make the state more accountable and cannot be the substitute for the state. But due to the contestedness of citizenship in post-colonial Africa, civil society has largely failed to exist as a stable consensual or cohesive arena (Osaghae 2006: 243). Contestations over citizenship pitting the former natives and former settlers have extended into what has generally come to be termed politics of belonging or autochthony (Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 2000: 423-452). At the centre of this politics is the phenomenon of nativism.

Rethinking decolonization discourses and the phenomenon of nativism

B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin have defined nativism as the desire by the formerly colonized societies for a return to indigenous practices and cultural forms as they existed in
pre-colonial society. They noted that the concept of nativism is most frequently encountered within discourse of decolonisation where the argument is that colonialism needed to be replaced by recovery and promotion of pre-colonial indigenous ways of life (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2000). Achille Mbembe who has emerged as one of the most severe critics of nativism in Africa, define it as a ‘discourse of rehabilitation’ at the centre of which is ‘a defence of humanity of Africans that is almost always accompanied by the claim that their race, tradition, and customs confer to them a peculiar self-irreducible to that of any other human group’ (Mbembe 2002a). According to Mbembe, nativism emerged at the ‘intersection of religious practices and the interrogation of human tragedy’ as part of African liberatory philosophy that is underpinned ‘by narratives of loss’ (Mbembe 2002a: 239).

Like all other ideologies of liberation that are linked to issues of identity construction nativism is continually watered from many nationalist springs, some local, some regional and some global, taking the form of a bastard concept born out of coalescence of politics of resistance, resentment and grievance. Mbembe is right that its emergence is to be located within ‘the problematics of self-constitution and the modern philosophy of the subject’ (Mbembe 2002a: 240). However, nativism’s contemporary manifestations reveal that its roots are located in both the present and the past as it magnifies both local and global power politics while at the same time reflecting both crisis and resurgence of African nationalism within a global context. Its meaning and essence therefore is to be sought within the broader past and present day global and local schisms that have left the African feeling alienated to the extent of searching for his/her identity and essence in the expanding global village. This argument is vindicated by Garth le Pere and Kato Lambrechts who observed that:

Globalisation and localisation have also, in many instances, unfolded in tandem and locality has survived alongside globality. Human affiliations and loyalties are still heavily influenced by a person’s particular location in the ‘global village,’ whether based on place, age, nationality, community, and so on (Pere & Lambrechts 1991: 21).

Almost all the imaginations of African liberation from colonialism ranging widely from those inspired by pre-colonial traditionalist cultural politics, Christian and Victorian liberalism, Africanist-nativist separatist ideologies like Ethiopianism, Negritudism, Garveyism and Pan-Africanism, African-American civil rights struggles, Gandhism to various forms of socialism were invariably shot through and permeated by nativism. Those political formations inspired
by Victorian ideologies of civil and political rights for civilized men attracted mainly a small clique of African educated elite that had converted to Christianity and had received mission-education. This early African educated elite was a direct product of colonization and ‘were the most exposed to European colonial ideologies of all groups of Africans’ (Ekeh 1975: 96) Imaginations of the world mainly took two main lenses the colonial one that Africans they were taught to like as civilized and the African world which they were taught to despise and hate as barbaric (Zeleza 2001). There were of course those Africans like Joshua Nkomo, Leopold Sedar Senghor and Jomo Kenyatta who developed a ‘romantic’ love for the pre-colonial African cultures and tried to mobilize these to pothole colonialism. But overall the African bourgeois class ‘accepts the principles implicit in colonialism but rejects the foreign personnel that ruled Africa’ (Ekeh 1975: 96). But to justify their rightfulness to replace colonial rulers, the African educated elites resorted to nativism which they intermingled with their anti-colonial ideologies, which Ekeh described as ‘interest-begotten reason and strategies of the Western educated African bourgeois who sought to replace the colonial rulers’ (Ekeh 1975: 100). Ekeh added that:

The ‘fight’ for independence was thus a struggle for power between the two bourgeois classes involved in the colonization of Africa. The intellectual poverty of the independence movement in Africa flows from this fact, that what was involved was not the issue of differences of ideas regarding moral principles but rather the issue of which bourgeois class should rule Africans (Ekeh 1975: 102).

Colonial bourgeois that ruled over colonial states fought to undercut and undermine the African bourgeois claims to political power through reinvention and revival of ‘African tradition’ as the basis of legitimacy and power and in the process reinforcing a particular kind of ethnicised nativism (Ranger 1983; Ranger 1993). Colonialism also had the effect of radicalizing some elements of the African educated elite to the extent that they formulated and embraced negritudist-decolonial discourses such as Garveyism and its ‘Africa for Africans’ ideology, black-consciousness and its mental-decolonization agenda and radical Pan-Africanism and its ideas of pan-African unity extending to the Diaspora and that was opposed to white rule. These decolonization discourses were heavily permeated by nativist views together with ideas of recovery of African authentic cultures and authentic identities that were disrupted by colonial capitalism and colonial cultural imperialism. A particular strand of this
radical Africanist position was well represented by the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) of South Africa whose leader Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe had this to say:

First of all we differ radically in our conception of the struggle. We firmly hold that we are oppressed as a subject nation—the African nation. To us, therefore, the struggle is a national struggle … [not] … a class struggle … Secondly we differ in our attitude to ‘co-operation’ with other national groups… There can be no co-operation between oppressor and oppressed, dominating and dominated. That is collaboration, not co-operation’… We claim Africa for Africans; the ANC claims South Africa for all (Karis & Gerhart 1997: 505-507).

But even those liberation movements that claimed to be propelled by liberal pluralist imaginations of liberation such as the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa could not afford to discard completely ideas of the liberation struggle as largely a black people’s struggle for lost lands and lost political power. In other words, a strong exclusivist Afro-radical ideology coexisted with liberal inclinations throughout the decolonization phase in African history with ideas of democracy and human rights consistently deployed concurrently with claims of sovereignty as well as socialist elements of struggling for equity and social justice. The pervasiveness of nativism, its continuous reverberation within and permeation of all the imaginations of liberation in one form or another led Benita Parry to conclude that:

When we consider the narrative of decolonisation, we encounter rhetorics in which ‘nativism’ in one form or another is evident. Instead of disciplining these, theoretical which in hand, as a catalogue of epistemological errors, of essentialist mystifications, as a masculinist appropriation of dissent, as no more than an anti-racist racism, etc.’ I want to consider what is to be gained from an unsententious interrogation of such articulations which, if often driven by negative passion, cannot be reduced to a mere inveighing against iniquities or a repetition of the canonical terms of imperialism’s conceptual framework (Parry 2004: 40).

Parry’s argument resonates with Kuan-Hsing Chen who noted that such a phenomenon as nativism cannot be understood outside the immanent logic of colonialism and decolonization as a counter to colonialism. This is how he puts it: ‘Shaped by the immanent logic of
colonialism, Third World nationalism could not escape from reproducing racial and ethnic discrimination; a price to be paid by the colonizer as well as the colonized selves’ (Chen 1998: 14). Despite the fact that at times nativist articulations have fed such violent acts as genocide and xenophobia giving nativism a very bad name, it has linkages with broader issues of nationalism, politics of self-determination, recovery of African values, indigenisation of economies and articulations and projection of particular African identities (Neocosmos 2006; Dorman et al 2007). Nativism is a direct product of a particular kind of history, a particular kind of colonialism, a particular kind of nationalism, particular kind of politics and a particular kind of African postcolonial state.

Defined within a historical context of colonialism and African nationalism, nativism cannot be treated outside the broader decolonization agenda in Africa. But one wonders why a scholar like Mbembe who correctly understands nativism ‘as one of the culturalist responses Africans have given to the fact of denial of their humanity’ turns around to adopt what Parry terms as ‘sententious’ interrogation backed by an unsympathetic theoretical whip consistent in its dismissal of nativism (Mbembe 2006). To him, nativism is nothing but ‘the burden of the metaphysics of difference’ premised on an emphasis on the ‘native condition’ (Mbembe 2002a: 240-241). According to Mbembe, the definition of the ‘native condition’ is premised on a particular reading of such historical events and processes as slavery, colonization and apartheid that is breeding the fatalistic philosophy of victimhood. Briefly stated, slavery is read as having led to estrangement of ‘African self,’ colonialism is understood in terms of dispossession and material expropriation, and apartheid is conceptualized as having introduced ‘humiliation, debasement, and nameless suffering’ that resulted in the African subject being plunged into ‘a zone of nonbeing and social death characterized by denial of dignity, heavy psychic damage, and the torment of exile’ (Mbembe 2002a: 241-242).

Mbembe proceeded to argue that:

These three fundamental elements of slavery, colonization, and apartheid are said to serve as a unifying center of Africans’ desire to know themselves, to recapture their destiny (sovereignty), and to belong to themselves in the world (autonomy) (Mbembe 2002a: 242).

According to Mbembe the net effect of all this is a ‘dead-end’ characterised by peddling of repetitive discourses of victimhood, reification of African historical experiences, reduction of
African history ‘to a series of subjugations, narrativised in a seamless continuity, exoneration of Africans from responsibility for ‘catastrophes that are befalling’ the continent and popularisation of the idea that ‘the present destiny of the continent’ is proceeding ‘not from free and autonomous choices but from the legacy of a history imposed upon Africans—burned into their flesh by rape, brutality, and all sorts of economic conditionalities’ (Mbembe 2002a: 243). To Mbembe, nativism is never a progressive force because ‘although the aim of the discourse of rehabilitation is to confirm that Africans too belong to humanity in general, it does not challenge the fiction of race’ (Mbembe 2002a: 254). What is more dangerous according to Mbembe about nativism is its rendition of African history and African condition without a critical eye ‘with regard to the so-called struggles for national liberation and to social movements: an emphasis on violence as the privileged avenue for self-determination; the fetishization of state power; the disqualification of the model of liberal democracy; and the populist and authoritarian dream of a mass society’ (Mbembe 2002a: 243-244).

Mbembe has mounted a very robust critique of nativism pointing out the dangers inherent in nativist thought. To him, way out of the ‘dead-end’ is via African embracement of globalisation and cosmopolitanism in place of celebration of autochthony founded on fatalistic ideas of victimhood and mutilation (Mbembe 2002a: 271-273). The problem in Mbembe’s analysis of nativism is that he reduces it to a mere pre-occupation with the question of identity and authenticity premised on ‘the cult of suffering and victimisation’ (Mbembe 2002b: 629-630). Nativism is more than a mere cultural pre-occupation with identity and authenticity. Besides, identity politics have come to the centre of political discourse across the whole human globe. The two case studies of Zimbabwe and South Africa help in revealing some of the latest concrete manifestations of nativism as both a reverse-discourse. Its dangers are in subverting civic conceptions of nation and citizenship as it reacts to the continued dominance of colonial and apartheid constructed economic structures of oppression and exploitation. The use of concrete and empirical case studies facilitates a scaling-down of the debate on nativism from the globalist normative framework replete with generalisations into engagement with specific manifestation of nativism within particular context in recent years. These case studies may conform or discredit some of the existing approaches to the phenomenon of nativism in Africa.
Zimbabwe: From Reconciliation to the Third Chimurenga as a Nativist Revolution

At the end of the Cold War, Zimbabwe gradually manifested a growing shift from developmental nationalism of the 1980s into Afro-radicalism and nativism of 2000s together with its emphasis on cultural nationalism. This shift happened in tandem with the emergence of a radical civil society that began to embrace and articulate post-Cold War neo-liberal ideologies of good governance, democracy and human rights. These developments were happening within a local context of Zimbabwe’s fast descent into an unprecedented economic crisis at the beginning of the 2000s and a global context of increasing international pressure on peripheral governments to embrace liberal democracy and its notions of rights. The nationalist liberation project was being pushed to the defensive by the triumphant forces of globalisation, neo-liberalism and cosmopolitanism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2006). Indeed by the mid-1990s, the nationalist project as represented by ZANU-PF plunged into its toughest times with indications of its bankruptcy if not exhaustion becoming increasingly manifest and apparent. The national referendum on the constitution of 1999 more than any other event revealed the waning popularity of ZANU-PF as it was defeated for the first time in an election since coming to power in 1980. The same period witnessed the launch of a strong opposition party known as the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) backed by a trade union and an assortment of human rights-oriented civic groups (Moyo, Makumbe and Raftopoulos 2000). It was in this context of weakening nationalism that the founder president of the MDC Morgan Tsvangirai pronounced a post-nationalist project:

In many ways, we are moving from the nationalist paradigm to politics grounded in civic society and social movements. It’s like the role and influence that in South Africa, the labour movement and civil society organisations had over the African National Congress in the early 1990s. MDC politics are not nationalist inspired, because they focus more on empowerment and participation of the people. ZANU PF’s nationalist thinking has always been top-down, centralised, always trapped in a time warp. Nationalist was an end in itself instead of a means to an end. One of ZANU PF’s constant claims is that everyone in Zimbabwe owes the nationalist movement our freedom. It’s therefore also become a nationalism based on patronage and cronyism (Southern Africa Report 2000).

As argued by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, nationalism and the concept of national sovereignty were losing their effectiveness with international bodies like IMF and World
Bank dominating global governance (Hardt & Negri 2000: 305). It was partly in response to the global and local attempts to bury the nationalist liberation project that Robert Mugabe launched the Third Chimurenga as a nativist revolution. This is how Mugabe put it:

We are now talking about the conquest of conquest, the prevailing sovereignty of the people of Zimbabwe over settler minority rule and all it stood for including the possession of our land…Power to the people must now be followed by land to the people (The Herald 6 Dec 1997).

What happened since the pronouncement of this statement was a growing revival of the tradition of national liberation in Zimbabwe and the increasing ‘othering’ of all other political forces operating outside ZANU-PF as front for re-colonisation of the country. What unfolded in Zimbabwe at the beginning of the 2000s particularly the frenzied re-creations of the liberation discourse in very narrow xenophobic, racist and nativist terms ranged against whites and those belonging to the MDC as fronts for colonialism confirmed Frantz Fanon’s warning that:

On the morrow of independence the national bourgeoisie…violently attacks colonial personalities…It will fight to the bitter end against these people ‘who insult our dignity as a nation.’ It waves aloft the notion of the nationalisation and Africanisation of the ruling classes. The fact is that such actions will become more and more tinged by racism, until the bourgeoisie bluntly puts the problem to the government by saying ‘We must have these posts’… The working class of the towns, the masses of the unemployed, the small artisans and craftsmen for their part line up behind this nationalist attitude; but in all justice let it be said, they only follow in the steps of their bourgeoisie…From nationalism we have passed to ultra-nationalism, to chauvinism, and finally to racism (Fanon 1990: 125).

Indeed a large section of emerging black/national bourgeoisie aligned to ZANU-PF frustrated by the slow pace of embourgeoisement, some sections of the academic fraternity, war veterans, ex-detainees and unemployed youth combined to support the Third Chimurenga with its nativist claims and its hostility towards whites. As argued by Brian Raftopoulos, the 2000s became the age of a revived nationalism ‘delivered in a particularly virulent form, with race as a key trope within the discourse, and a selective rendition of the liberation history
deployed as an ideological policing agent in the public debate’ (Raftopoulos 2007: 101). Seen from this perspective, nativism reveals itself as easily appropriable by African political elites and those in control of African states to partly buttress regime security and to win the support of the subaltern through populist mobilisation around issues of indigenous claims to such resources as land.

The Zimbabwean nativist project of the 2000s developed through mobilisation of the memory of the liberation struggle, pan-Africanism and other anti-colonial resources including reclamation of lost land as a native heritage. Most writers on the Third Chimurenga often made the mistake of reducing it to the controversial fast-track land reform programme (Sachikonye 2003: 227-240). Like all nativist revolutions, the Third Chimurenga was backed by a very elaborate cultural component that included music galas, annual commemorations of departed heroes, re-definition of national days such as independence and heroes days and re-definition of citizenship in non-civic terms as well as promulgation of what Terence Ranger terms ‘patriotic history’ (Willems & Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2008; Ranger 2004: 215-234; Bull-Christiansen 2004). Besides, commemoration, concrete steps were taken to forcibly inculcate liberation struggle history on the nation in general and the youth in particular in an endeavour to create what was termed a ‘patriotic citizenry.’ This took two forms. The first was introduction of a compulsory course in teacher-training poly-technical colleges known as National Strategic Studies aimed at teaching issues of national strategic importance like sovereignty, national ethos, history of the liberation struggle and the importance of land for economic development and as part of native heritage. The second was introduction of National Youth Training Service Programme as a conduit to reproduce the traditions of the national liberation struggle through forcible and intensive inculcation on the youth of a very partisan narrative of national history of liberation.

While the opposition MDC was emphasising issues of democracy, human rights and good governance, ZANU-PF emphasised the issue of social justice and economic empowerment of the people through land reform. ZANU-PF emphasised the resolution of the national question whereas MDC emphasised the democratic question. Those scholars in favour of the land reform in Zimbabwe like Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros celebrated the late 1990s and the beginning of 2000s as a period of revolutionary situation in which a ‘radical state’ was in the forefront for the resolution of the national question via radical agrarian reform. To them, Zimbabwe was the first state on the African continent since the end of the Cold War that
embarked on a revolution to sort out the national question (Moyo & Yeros 2007: 103). Without ignoring the violence and the corruption that accompanied the fast-track land reform programme, one is bound to accept Moyo and Paris’ analysis that this was indeed a bold revolutionary action to complete an ‘unfinished business’ of land distribution (Hammer & Raftopoulos 2003).

Citizenship was re-defined in the context of repudiation of the earlier policy of reconciliation. The white commercial farmers in particular who owned large tracks of land were quickly re-defined as amabhunu (Boers, a reference to white settlers in South Africa) rather than citizens and Mugabe declared that ‘our party must strike fear into the heart of the white man. They must tremble’ (Mugabe 2000). Citizenship became re-defined in nativist terms that excluded white races as Mugabe proclaimed ‘Zimbabwe for Zimbabweans’ ideology. Articulating the philosophy behind nativist and Afro-radical discourses, Mbembe wrote:

Nativist and Afro-radical discourses of the self are both projects of self-regeneration, self-knowledge, and self-rule. Self-knowledge and self-rule are justified in the name of autochthony. According to the argument of autochthony, each spatio-racial formation has its own culture, its own historicity, its own way of being, and its own relationship with the future and with the past. Each has, as it were, its own certificate of origin and its own telos. In all cases, the idea is that the encounter between Africa and the West resulted in a deep wound: a wound that cannot heal until the ex-colonised rediscover their own being and their own past (Mbembe 2002: 635).

When Mugabe told the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair to keep his Britain and stating that he (Mugabe) would keep his Zimbabwe, he was projecting a clear ‘spatio-racial’ argument that was well put by Mbembe. A group of what one would term ‘nativist’ scholars from the University of Zimbabwe have been mobilised by the state to articulate nativist conceptions of citizenship under a televised programme known as ‘National Ethos.’ The leading personages in this programme include Dr. Vimbai Chivaura, Professor Claude Mararike, Dr. Tafataona Mhosó, Professor Isheunesu Mpepereki and some others invited guests like Dr. Kenneth Manungo. Reading from their utterances, these scholars are trying to shape and influence public discourse in the direction of nativism. Their topics are generally about heritage and African indigenous knowledge intertwined with the liberation struggle.
These ‘regime scholars’ are blindly regurgitating ZANU-PF discourse and are at pains to give it an intellectual underpinning and respectability (Tendi 2008).

The issue of citizenship in postcolonial societies like Zimbabwe are at the centre of the agenda of resolution of the national question as it relates to the issues of race relations, settler-native binaries, and ownership of resources like mines and land, and control of national public discourse (Mamdani 2001: 63-73). The other aspect of the Third Chimurenga was resolution of the ownership of the state and the manning of state institutions. While all other institutions had underwent Africanisation since 1980, the judiciary system had remained manned by a predominantly white judges inherited from the colonial era. Under the Third Chimurenga, these white judges including Chief Justice Anthony Gubbay were forced to leave the bench by war veterans with the blessings of the state and the political elite. The white judges were blamed for constantly blocking the land reform through judiciary decisions that always favoured the white commercial farmers.

Throughout the unfolding of the Third Chimurenga Robert Mugabe became very active as the most articulate and most committed later-day nationalist revolutionary, continuing the tradition of nationalist liberation agenda. This led Tafataona Mahoso and other ‘regime intellectuals’ to celebrate Mugabe as the embodiment and keeper of patriotic memory. Mahoso wrote that Mugabe represented ‘pan-African memory,’ he was a ‘reclaimer of African space’ and was ‘the African power of remembering the African legacy and African heritage which slavery, apartheid and imperialism though they had dismembered for good’ (The Sunday Mail 16 March 2003).

South Africa: From Rainbow Nation to the Native Club
In South Africa the embers of nativism took the form of an intellectual initiative known as the Native Club that was launched in Tshwane in 2006. According to the proponents of this Native Club it was launched as a public initiative whose main objective was to mobilise and consolidate South African black intelligentsia into a vibrant social force able to shape national discourse and influence government policy direction, particularly the democratic transformation agenda. The formation of the Native Club came as a major challenge to those who favoured the spirit of ‘rainbowism’ as introduced by the Nelson Mandela administration in 1994. No wonder then that its launch raised animated debate, described by Tom Nevin as follows:
Since its existence became public, the passage of The Native Club, South Africa’s latest hot potato, has been a baptism of fire. At the outset, it was accused of appropriating the politically loaded label ‘native’ for its own ends; more controversially, it has been accused of racial exclusivity. Its independence and objectivity has also been brought into question, not least due to its apparent patronage by government, although President Thabo Mbeki has more recently been at pains to qualify his acceptance of the forum (Nevin 2006).

The Native Club was formed by a group of African intellectuals who were very critical of what they perceived to be the continued white domination of knowledge production and determination of public discourse in post-apartheid South Africa. The Native Club closely aligned itself to the revival of the spirit of African nationalism and the continuation of the nationalist crusade to achieve complete decolonisation and in the process embracing the philosophy of African Renaissance as the central guide in the current postcolonial African struggles for democracy and social justice including making the African voice within the public sphere (Mail & Guardian 7 April 2006). According to its proponents, the Native Club’s vision included facilitation of African contribution to the on-going process of cultural decolonisation of the South African people and the country; complete eradication apartheid and colonial mindset; enhancement of self-affirmation of black African people; protection and promotion of indigenous languages, cultures, traditions and music; adding impetus to moral regeneration; promotion of a culture of critical thinking among African through reading, reflection and debates; utilisation and deployment of indigenous cultures, indigenous knowledge and values to advance nation-building and democratic transformation; and active participation of Africans in the shaping and controlling of national discourse on socio-economic, political and cultural issues.

The launch of the Native Club was under the banner of ‘Where are the Natives?’ and Magashe Titus Mafolo, a senior political adviser to President Thabo Mbeki and the chairman of the Native Club gave details on the circumstances and thinking behind its launch in a newspaper article. According to him there was noticeable decline in intellectual engagement by blacks since 1994 that called for re-mobilisation of black intellectuariat into a vibrant forum to counter the current situation where ‘well-resourced, organised and strategically placed neo-liberals are consistent in trying to shape the form and content of the transformation
of SA through public discourse, vocal and visible campaigns for their causes and better networking’ (Mafolo 2006a). The Native Club was also poised to engage in systematic and intellectually thought-out critique of the neo-liberal ideology that was seen as maintaining and buttressing apartheid-induced gross material inequalities. On the position of Native Club vis-à-vis neo-liberal ideology, Mafolo pointed out that the club ‘firmly believed that neoliberalism is inimical to the objectives of transformation and national reconstruction, at least in terms set and determined by the historically marginalised sections of our society’ (Mafolo 2006a). He went on to argue that:

We seek to build a climate congenial to continued reflection and self-examination by the native intelligentsia, asserting itself in the realm of arts and culture, socio-economy and politics. The SA intelligentsia faces a cardinal responsibility to mobilise the weakest and most vulnerable sections of the society to find their voices, to live up to its historical obligation of developing and sustaining critical consciousness among the people. We see the scientific, literary and artistic members of our society playing a central role in the regeneration of our young people, in the form of creative writing, poetry, participating in debates and generally contesting ideas (Mafolo 2006a).

Articulating a clearly cultural nativist thought, Mafolo openly railed against what he termed an identity crisis in South Africa stating that:

Though we are Africans, many South Africans seem to have an identity crisis. Through our dress, music, cuisine, role models and reference points we seem to be clones of Americans and Europeans (Mafolo 2006a).

In the middle of serious criticism of the Native Club mainly by white liberal intellectuals as retrogressive and as nothing but reverse-racism, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Africa (UNISA), N. Barney Pityana came in to support the club in these words:

The Native Club, in fact, draws from Fanonian language when he talks about the native intellectual, the ‘settler’ and the colonial critic. A native intellectual is an intellectual who claims his/her intellectual inspiration from indigenous African knowledge systems and values, who espouses them without shame; and which knowledge systems becomes the fulcrum by which the rest of knowledge systems are
leveraged and tested, and whose reference point and inspiration is the people of Africa and their identity. Fanon noted that there would be colonial detractors of the effort by the native intellectual to claim back territory and make lost ground…Native intellectuals owe nobody but themselves an explanation for their initiatives (Pityana 2006: 10).

According to its founding chairperson, the Native Club was the ‘third pillar of transformation’ with a specific focus on cultural revival (Mafolo 2000b). Eddy Maloka on the other hand traced the roots of the Native Club to Afro-radical liberatory traditions of Black Consciousness, Pan-Africanism and Negritude, noting that throughout the liberation struggle ‘the realm of ideas always stood vigilant behind the barrel of the gun’ (Maloka 2006).

Achille Mbembe, however, mounted a severe critique of the Native Club and its nativist tendencies, likening it to the fatalistic ‘Nongqawuse’ millenarian prophecy of the nineteenth century that misled the Xhosa people to kill all their cattle on the understanding that once that was done, Xhosa ancestral spirits would rise and sweep away the white settlers into the sea leading to the restoration of the olden days (Mbembe 2006; Peires 1989). According to him, the proponents of the Native Club were nothing more than latter-day false prophets in the mould of Nongqawuse prophecy which he defined as syndrome: ‘Nongqawuse syndrome is a populist rhetoric and a millenarian form of politics which advocates, uses and legitimises self-destruction or national suicide, as a means of salvation’ (Mbembe 2006). To him, the task of nativism was generally to create a common language of grievance through repetition of ‘the sorry history it pretends to redress’ (Mbembe 2006). While Mbembe is right warning us against nativism, he has tended to over-argue his condemnation at the expense of making historical sense of nativism.

Nativism is in vogue in South Africa because of the emerging limits of both liberal democracy and the limits of the nationalist agenda. Read closely, the current manifestations of nativism cannot be dismissed as an aberration brought about from outside the current neoliberal realm and African nationalist project. The colonial experience together with the nationalist experience produced and reinforced essentialist and primordialist conception of culture and tradition. Don Robotham had this to say:
When these hundreds of years of common history include merciless cruelties, denigrations, and exploitation by the same oppressor, a particularly fierce nationalism is often the result. This collective sentiment simmers over centuries and then may burst forth with fanatical ferocity. While at the abstract level one can extract the universally human from the particular experience of local groups, all people make history in the concrete. It is this actually concrete common historical experience that generates distinctive identities and necessarily finds expression in national movements dedicated to that specific cause (Robotham 2005: 567).

C. R. D. Halisi concluded that in South Africa, rival populisms that were nourished by competing nationalist liberation visions were automatically bound to impact on the evolution of South Africa citizenship because popular democratic traditions, of which populism is one manifestation, were among the most durable sources of inspiration for democratic thinkers. He added that ‘it would be unrealistic to expect an ethos of non-racial citizenship to prevail unchallenged by older political perceptions…for the immediate future, successive governments will have to cope with sensibilities grounded in both non-racial and race politics’ (Halisi 1997: 78).

Conclusion: Nativism, African Public Sphere and the ‘Democratic Paradox’
In a recent book Ivor Chipkin raised the fundamental question of how an African ‘people’ came into being in the first place, particularly in the South African context, as a collectivity organised in pursuit of a political—and not simply cultural end (Chipkin 2007). He pointed out that ‘African people emerged primarily in and through the process of national resistance to colonialism’ (Chipkin 2007: 2). The African post-colonial nation is itself a political community ‘whose form is given in relation to the pursuit of democracy and freedom’ (Chipkin 2007: 2). This simply means that a more useful understanding of the history of post-colonial Africa is one that takes into account the fact that it is largely a history of a people-in-the-making (people *qua* production). This is why the democratic project firmly places the identity of ‘the people’ on the agenda leading Chipkin to argue that: ‘We should not be surprised, therefore, to observe that the ongoing democratisation of the African states has been accompanied by a renewed preoccupation with authenticity’ (Chipkin 2007: 3). The phenomenon of nativism emerges within this terrain in which politics of identity impinges on the politics of democratisation. Nativism struggles for an African public sphere in which Africans have a right to self-definition, where Africans own the state, and where Africans are
free from interference of colonial matrix of power and where they are allowed to determine their political and economic destiny. Defined and read from this perspective, nativism is a form of reverse-discourse with its own agency and status rooted in discourse of decolonisation. The contemporary currencies of nativism dramatises the realities of the current state of the African postcolonial political community together with its peculiar state-society relations that has a bearing on the imaginations of democracy and the public sphere. Thus instead of approaching nativism with a disciplining theoretical whip or subjecting it to sententious interrogations, there is need to make sense of it as an important part of the current conjecture in which identities have become central aspects of politics of democratization.

Chantal Mouffe argued that democracy always entailed relations of inclusion and exclusion that spoke to the notion of the political frontier, adding that the key problem with contemporary democracy is that it is not constituted on any measure of population, be it race, culture, religion, ethnicity or a combination of these (Mouffe 2000: 43). Perhaps nativism is a response to this democratic limit or what Mouffe terms ‘the democratic paradox’ (Mouffe 2000: 55). Mouffe has concluded that: ‘The moment of rule is indissociable from the very struggle about the definition of the people, about the constitution of its identity’ (Mouffe 2000: 56). Nativism is about who belongs to the political community, who has a right to rule, what has legitimacy to determine public discourse and who has a right to constitute the African public sphere. What needs further interrogation is the extent of democracy within nativist inspired movements, the question of which voices are filtered out of nativist imaginations of state, nation and democracy, and measuring the extent of coherence and homogeneity of nativism as a social movement including its capacity to successfully challenge neo-liberalism and globalisation.
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