AFRICAN IDENTITY
European Invention or Genuine African Character?

The quest for national identity and independence is one of the burning issues of our time. Oppressed national identity has created and still creates violence and war. Look to the Soviet Union, the Baltic states, and Yugoslavia, and indeed to a number of African countries.

Personal identity is also an increasingly painful problem. Alienation, Entfremdung as a consequence of rapid and drastic social change is not just an old-fashioned Marxist slogan from the last century Europe. Social changes, often caused by eruptive migration of national or regional groups and political refugees are today more dramatic and global than in any other part of the history of the humankind.

No wonder, then that African identity is a relevant topic for Africans as well as for alert people from other parts of the world. The literature on African history, religions and theology is enormous. A recent book on liberation theology in Tanzania and South Africa has an excellent list on African theology, but far from complete. It is, however, my impression that it has been taken for granted that there is an African identity, without a comprehensive analysis or even a serious discussion of the problem. This can not be proved in a minor article. But I can point to some indications.

A standard work comprising several thousand pages in 8 volumes, The Cambridge History of Africa, has not really dealt with the problem. With all respect for the eminent Africanists who have written this gold mine of Africa expertise, it is mostly written from a European point of view. This was natural due to the lack of written African sources. Richard Gray puts it thus: "What was known as Africa in Europe was limited to the coasts of the continent and particularly to the west coast, where trade was most intense." The periodization of the volumes are European, as Roland Oliver correctly observes. "There is obviously no scheme of periodization which is valid for Africa as a whole." It has been a matter of course to speak of French Africa, British West Africa and Liberia, Belgian Africa etc. The discussion of what African identity is has been non-existing in important documents in which a reflection on the topic might have been expected. This was the case in, for instance, Pius' XII encyclical The Future of Africa and in the documents...
of the Second Vatican Council. The same lack of definition and reflection can be seen in some textbooks on the history of missions and in otherwise informative Africa books. The geography of Africa, surrounded by oceans, its coast line without fjords, its size and climate are frequently mentioned, but next to nothing about the name Africa and little on what is African. And even more surprising: The Charter of the Organization of African Unity, with its 33 articles, has not a single word on our problem, obviously because it is not seen as a problem. All the way African identity is taken for granted.

The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, EATWOT, is a small organization of some fifty members. At its first meeting only 22 theologians participated. Nevertheless, its influence is considerable due to the participation and leadership of some of the most trend-setting Third World theologians, especially from Latin America and Africa. EATWOT's first two meetings took place in Africa. In the statement of 1976 from Dar es Salaam one will search in vain for any attempt to define Africa and African. The Accra statement of 1977 was given the title African Theology en Route and was the findings of the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians. This statement includes interesting observations on colonial and post-colonial Africa, on the presence of Christianity in Africa, on the emergence of African theologies and on the perspectives for the future. Nevertheless, the terms Africa and African are not discussed. It is, however, important to notice that the statement speaks of African theologies in plural.

The etymological approach to the problem may not be the most fruitful way, but it should not be rejected without consideration. In an encyclopedia from 1907 we are told that originally only a minor part of Africa was known, obviously by Europeans, namely Libya. Africa, it is said, is the name which the Phoenicians and later the Romans used to designate the area surrounding Carthage, later the Roman province Africa, probably stemming from a local tribe called the Afrians. The Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa also demonstrates the European point of departure: "The term 'Africa,' originally the land about Carthage, had come to mean by the 1st century A.D. the land south of the Mediterranean." The conclusion seems to be that Africa is a latinized form of a local North African tribal name, meaning the Carthage area, and gradually known as the continent of Africa. The understanding of Africa as a continent came very late, in Europe as well as in Africa. This is not surprising. How could it be otherwise? In no part