

## IDENTITY AS EVOLUTIVE

An intercultural approach based on an examination of Mudimbe, de Beauvoir, Taylor, and Mbembe

by Carolien Ceton<sup>1</sup>

*ABSTRACT:* In this article, four different philosophers' views on identity are confronted using three different approaches: how identity is formed through recognition, how it legitimises power structures and how our corporeality influences identity-formation. Mbembe and Taylor both view identity as a valuable achievement to be preserved, whereas Taylor bases identity on cultural singularity, and Mbembe designates daily necessity as the basis of identity-formation. De Beauvoir and Mudimbe view identity as a pitfall we have to liberate ourselves from: the human being should conceive of oneself as a project. For de Beauvoir, identity can only unfold within physical, daily reality. The significance attached to daily life by both Mbembe and Beauvoir represents a fruitful point of departure. It creates space to (re)think identity in terms of an evolving or evolutive entity, something that develops in accordance with our daily practice, always elaborating upon what came before. This way, an identity can be divers and coherent at the same time.

*KEYWORDS:* Intercultural philosophy, African philosophy, feminist philosophy, identity, authenticity, existentialism

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## *Introduction*

Mudimbe – philosopher, author, African, cosmopolitan<sup>2</sup> – does not believe in any kind of name-tagging. Identity does not exist, but is merely a way to restrict oneself to the fulfilment of just one particular role in life. Also, philosophy does not exist; it is a “perpetual recommencement”, says Mudimbe. But even for Mudimbe the lifelong duty to avoid pinning down oneself in any way and make the most of one’s freedom instead, sometimes seems too heavy a burden. To the above-mentioned statement, he immediately added:

“And I’m sick of it! It is a nightmare! You try it, for 20 years!”<sup>3</sup>

Identity is a socio-historical construction. A construction that is too frequently used to put people in their place, a place they never chose themselves. Identity is used to exert power over people, to discriminate against them, to deny them the freedom to live their lives as they wish. Plenty of reasons to think we would be better off without identity altogether. But damaging though it often is, can we do entirely without it? Or is there anything we should put in its place?

The post-modern answer is well-known: we should abandon the idea of a unified identity altogether because the human being is fundamentally fragmented. To me, this seems a rather awkward and unsatisfactory solution, leaving many concrete human experiences and questions incomprehensible. In this article, I would like to confront the views of four different philosophers on this question, hoping to discover a more fruitful way to think about identity. What exactly is identity, and how did it come about? Three lines of thought are discernible throughout the article: how identity is formed

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<sup>2</sup> Van Binsbergen on Mudimbe:

“...what is clearly one of the great creative cosmopolitan minds ... of our times.”

in: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2005, ‘“An incomprehensible miracle” – Central African clerical intellectualism versus African historic religion: A close reading of Valentin Mudimbe’s *Tales of Faith*’, in: Kai Kresse, ed., *Reading Mudimbe*, special issue of the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 17, 1, June 2005: 11-65; also at: [http://www.shikanda.net/african\\_religion/mudil0.htm](http://www.shikanda.net/african_religion/mudil0.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Mudimbe during an interview, Durham, 8/3/2002.

through recognition, how it is utilised to legitimise certain power structures and how our corporeality influences identity-formation.

Of these different approaches, the first two represent mainstream views within political and philosophical theories. Obviously, one follows naturally from the other. If identity is a product of (the absence of) recognition by someone's social environment, the conditions for a power-relation with that environment are already given. In order to not get stuck in this somewhat – in my opinion – abstract reasoning, I want to add the third theme of corporeality as a source of identity. This line of approach has been explored, among others, by feminist philosophy. To me, it offers the possibility to connect to daily reality and continue the discussion on a more concrete and tangible level. In the end, I want to combine the thought that identity is created by people in response to their daily practice with the human longing for an (to a certain extent) integrated self-image.

The first of the four philosophers to put in an appearance is Taylor, who has contributed greatly to mainstream theories concerning recognition and the role it plays in identity-formation. Mudimbe and de Beauvoir both subscribe to this analyses: a subject is formed in a process of recognition or denial by the 'other.' Unfortunately, because the circumstances from which people operate are not equal, recognition and the ensuing subject-formation is not mutual. In Mudimbe's analyses the African identity – similar to the female identity in de Beauvoir's work – is constructed as the *absolute* other by a more powerful counterpart. Identity as it is should be done away with and human life should be viewed as a project, to be chosen and fulfilled on a personal basis. De Beauvoir's and Mudimbe's analyses depart where our bodily existence comes into view. For de Beauvoir, our corporeality is of great importance to our personal project. Her views on corporeality play a decisive part in my argument. Finally, I draw on the work of Mbembe, who focuses on African identity, not as it came about in the colonial era, but as it is developing at the present time.

### *The cultural component of identity*

Hermeneutics is one of Taylor's greatest sources of inspiration. He adheres strongly to the idea that people are self-interpreting animals; the human

being as a self-developing and an expressive being, including related values of individuality, unicity and authenticity. The fact that people attach meaning to their own acts is characteristic of human kind. Values only posses meaning because we have attributed those meanings ourselves. Truly important values and norms are different in this way than arbitrary tastes. People use their desires as a standard to evaluate things by, but at the same time those desires themselves are being evaluated. This is the evaluation of so-called second-order preferences, or to use Taylor's expression: *strong* evaluation. A human being or 'self' is someone who can make such second-order choices. It is our second-order preferences that define our identity; should we change them, then we would be changing our very selves.<sup>4</sup>

Taylor passionately wants to discredit what he calls the theory of radical freedom of choice. Our choices are never free; they come about on the basis of our identity. Our identity, for its part, acquires meaning only within an existing society, language and culture. This fact in itself – even though Taylor acknowledges the possibility of criticising one's own culture – represents sufficient reason to declare the theory of radical freedom unacceptable. Taylor strongly emphasises the significance of our social environment. First of all, the human being is dialogical by nature, meaning that he can only develop and identify himself in dialogue with other people. Secondly, a shared *horizon of meaning* is a necessary condition for identity development. The ability to choose freely is not enough; some choices must be more valuable than others, otherwise the act of choosing becomes an empty gesture. It is precisely Taylor's horizon of meaning that makes some of our choices more valuable than others.

On the basis of the culture-bound nature of identity, Taylor also rejects the ideal of detachment. Unless one assumes a specific cultural position, to speak of moral ideals, identity or meaning is completely senseless. Freedom consists in the ability – starting from existing values – to criticise our culture bit by bit and thus improve our moral ideals.

According to Taylor, Western modern identity has gone off the rails. The modern self is a stripped version of individualism; the self has become sovereign whilst its social environment only serves as a stage for self-discovery. The autonomous, detached individual is a perversion of the otherwise posi-

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<sup>4</sup> Tjong Tjin Tai, 'Inleiding op Taylor', 1997, p. 2.

tively valued individuality that is so characteristic of western culture. We will not be doing ourselves a favour if we renounce, along with this perverted version, all forms of individualism. The right interpretation of values like individuality and authenticity presupposes a society that exerts a moral influence on the individual. Our social environment is not simply a working space but the breeding ground of our identity.<sup>5</sup> The individual can only discover what is valuable on the basis of the values made available to him by society. Individuality is not a radical detachment from society but a personal assimilation of influences both from within and without.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the individual must not cut himself off from the outside world, but should rather enter into dialogue with others.

### *Mudimbe: identity & freedom as arch-enemies*

Mudimbe subscribes to Taylor's idea that recognition is of crucial importance to identity-formation, and that is precisely where the similarity between the two ends. Whereas Taylor sees identity as the development of authenticity against the background of a shared horizon of meaning, to Mudimbe identity is purely a construction. Obviously the same applies to the African identity, although this identity represents a special case. 'The' African identity has not just been constructed as the other, but as a collective and historical other. Mudimbe contends that Africa is an invention of the west. The west needed an antipole with which it could express its own identity as a rational subject. Thus the African became the reverse of the western self; not just the other representing all that the westerner was not, but the key to western identity itself.

The objectification of the African identity is the result of various western power structures. Obviously, the political domination of the colonial era exerted a major influence, but cognitive forms of power – anthropological studies, philosophical concepts – have made a contribution as well. With

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<sup>5</sup> Houtepen, in: *De Malaise van de Moderniteit*, 1991, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Houtepen, in: *De Malaise van de Moderniteit*, 1991, p. 14.

Mudimbe, identity is a result of different power techniques. In his analyses, power and identity are very closely knit. Intellectual, economical and political power structures developed and consolidated themselves in mutual correlation. Western discourse on Africa and the African response it has provoked, amount to a struggle concerning the control over African identity. The answers that have been formulated in response have not been able to wrestle themselves from western rationality as it dominates the created images. Mudimbe has set himself the task of deconstructing these images along all possible lines of approach. The attempt to create a truthful identity in which the western images no longer resound is senseless. It is, to Mudimbe, fundamentally a losing battle: identity always represents a construction, a construction that is always restrictive for the people to which it applies.

It is remarkable that in Mudimbe's analyses pre-colonial history is entirely left aside, even though he thinks African heritage includes not just the colonial past but the pre-colonial experience as well. Mudimbe's only solution lies in a radical break with the notion of identity altogether. Just by speaking about an identity, it becomes fixed – a dilemma we cannot evade.

Taylor is one of the victims of this dilemma. With his pronounced ideal of authenticity, essentialist traits creep into his thinking. To Taylor, our cultural definition is not just a fact of life, but – by definition – a positive and unsuspected contribution to our personal existence. We must develop an authentic identity which is truly authentic when built from a shared background of meaning. Taylor unfortunately does not question or elaborate upon this so-called background. Our cultural background is, without hesitation, an inviolable source of the good, an unquestionable origin of our values.<sup>7</sup> For Taylor culture is a homogenous and clearly definable entity. A cultural background never consists of different, sometimes conflicting, elements – contrary to what people have to deal with in real life. Every culture comprises several ways of life, languages, religions etc. Taylor's background boils down to a simplification of reality; unfortunately, there is no such thing as an unequivocal background from which identities can sprout. Human identity does not have its origins in an alleged homogenous culture,

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<sup>7</sup> Tjong Tjin Tai, 'Inleiding op Taylor', 1997, p. 4.

but is at the same time personal and collective.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, in Taylor's analyses of the human query for authenticity, he only pays attention to authenticity as a result of acknowledgement of our true selves. He does mention the oppositional aspects of authenticity – the reaction against our social environment – but does not elaborate upon them.

### *The human being as a project*

*"And I think that the most beautiful mystification, the most remarkable lie of our century – the last and the new – is the belief that the identity of women, the identity of Africans, the identity of Europeans can be limited to this or that element. And that's not true. Anything is possible."*

According to Mudimbe identity might exist in mathematics, but it surely does not in social sciences.<sup>9</sup> In human life we should understand identity as a project.

"There is an identity, my identity, when I am dead",  
says Mudimbe.

"But before that I can chose, change my orientations. I am a project. We should understand our choices in terms of transforming our existences and making our lives a work of art. It is only when we are gone that we can be given an identity. And people know that by instinct when they speak of someone they have loved. Maybe their grandmother has gone, and people say she had a beautiful life, a wonderful life. At that moment we are giving someone an identity and considering the life of that person as a work of art."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Tjong Tjin Tai, 'In Cultuur Gebracht', in: *Van Agora tot Markt*, 1996, p. 239.

<sup>9</sup> Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables*, 1991, p. xx.

<sup>10</sup> Ceton, 'Alles is Mogelijk', in: *Filosofie Magazine*, September 2002, p. 38.

The big mistake people make, is when they assume a fixed identity during their life-time. Things that happen to them are subsequently accounted for on the basis of such an identity, which is – to Mudimbe – never justifiable. We should conceive of our human existence as a project: we are making ourselves what we have chosen to become. Whether our project will be successful depends upon the choices we make. These choices can always be renewed; every project can always be reshaped. Testifying to his existentialist persuasion, Mudimbe says:

“We can choose, always. To choose is difficult because we act generally in bad faith. And bad faith is not a lie, it is self-deception. We must understand our choices as part of the transformation of our existence, the recreation of our lives in a work of art.”

To prevent rigidity, Mudimbe seeks the solution in perpetual movement, thereby running the risk of making movement an aim in itself.

Mudimbe does not deny any influence from the outside world.

“We become what we are because of our culture. And here I do not resist to refer to Descartes who said that our predicament is that we have been children.”

But in the last resort, such an influence can never be the decisive factor.

“We are born, we have to work and we die. And that condition, the human condition, transcends all differences of sexes, races.”<sup>11</sup>

Mudimbe condemns those who use – for example – racism or sexism as an explanation of their own personal failure.

“I did something wrong – oh, I did not make it because I’m African. I did something wrong – I did not make it but you know, it’s because of the existence of sexism in the society.”

All bad faith according to Mudimbe. Nonetheless, some of the characteristics people use to designate their identity are physically specified. In Mudimbe’s example – being African or female – it seems farfetched to deny that people view each-other as being exactly that: African or woman. Does

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<sup>11</sup> Mudimbe during an interview, Duke University, Durham, 7/ 3/ 2002.

our bodily existence come into any of this? Mudimbe endorses the fact that others view us in terms of our bodily characteristics, but he immediately adds:

“Our body, just like this table here, is an in-itself, an être en-soi. *But I am more*; I am a conscious being, a for-itself or être pour-soi.”<sup>12</sup>

With this, Mudimbe’s theorising becomes seriously problematic. Our body may be a useful and practical instrument,<sup>13</sup> but in the end it is insignificant as far as peoples’ life-shaping choices are concerned. At the same time, Mudimbe insists that we – our selves, our identity – are beings for others.

“Everything we do, even when we are alone, is like a response to external expectations. Expectations of others. We are fundamentally beings for others.”

The human being exists, but for others; and these others first of all perceive his body. How can Mudimbe expect this perception, based on our physical existence, to be of no consequence to the choices we make (later) in life? Mudimbe’s only way out is an escape to ever higher levels of abstraction. By making a quick switch-over to our consciousness, Mudimbe denies any true significance of our physical existence. In the end, our consciousness is the truly human form of existence; it exceeds all differences.

Mudimbe claims a human universality which comes across rather sympathetic from a emancipatorical point of view. We all share the same human existence, so why should we let ourselves be guided by our differences in this life? At the same time, his human universality represents an escape into abstraction. Since there is no place for our physical existence in his thinking, there is no other option left for him, but to seek the solution in a universal existence slowly dissolving into nothing.

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<sup>12</sup> Mudimbe during an interview, Duke University, Durham, 7/ 3/ 2002. My italics.

<sup>13</sup> Mudimbe during an interview, Duke University, Durham, 7/ 3/ 2002.

### *The body in focus*

Like Mudimbe – with whom she shares several existentialist assumptions – de Beauvoir also maintains that we should conceive of our existence as a project. But as Mudimbe's body is rendered meaningless by his omnipotent consciousness, de Beauvoir tries to reconcile those two elements of human life. In her thinking, a major part is played by our physical existence. In this way, she creates ample space within her analyses for the many concrete experiences people have in daily life.

De Beauvoir wants to reconcile body and consciousness through the emotions. In an emotion our corporeality can *coincide* with our consciousness, because an emotion can serve so to speak as a short-cut to the consciousness. While (bodily) experiencing an emotional response, one no longer regards the other from without but is able to truly sympathise. This way, one is no longer an outsider but an integral part of the situation encountered by the other. Emotions presents us with an opportunity to become truly involved with another human being, thus preventing our consciousness of placing itself opposite the other as is inevitably the case in Sartrean existentialist thinking. The coincidence of body and consciousness renders contact established through emotion much more direct than a purely rational connection. To use de Beauvoir's words: an emotion can dissolve the immediate difference between self and other.

Involvement with the people around us is a fact of human existence to de Beauvoir. Our corporeality implies the concreteness of our being. People attach a certain meaning to their body, and these meanings depend on the situation they find themselves in. Obviously, this situation is constantly subject to all kinds of changes, and the meaning we attribute to our body changes along. In that sense, the human being is by nature a social being or – using de Beauvoir's words – the human being is *situated*.<sup>14</sup> De Beauvoir believes people should not deny their situated nature, but should accept it. As long as we keep aloof from others we will remain indifferent, our lives will be empty and meaningless. Meaning is attached to our bodies, our actions and our selves only within the context of a social community; the meaning of our existence depends upon this community. For de Beauvoir,

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<sup>14</sup> Vintges, *Filosofie als Passie*, 1992, p. 79.

the emotions, our situatedness, the unity of body and consciousness, are all the same. It is our direct connection with the world, whereby solidarity becomes a possibility.

Solidarity, however, is merely one of many possible outcomes and certainly not something that automatically follows from our situated nature. The body – with every meaning we attach to it – can also be a place of oppression. The female body for example is, in de Beauvoir's mind, 'occupied' by patriarchal power. Our bodies are completely formed by our particular situation, our social environment and (if all is right) by ourselves. If others – through their position of power – are able to fully determine the meaning of our bodies, our bodies have become instruments of oppression.

### The active willing of freedom

De Beauvoir thinks the physical dimension of human existence implies that the human being is always situated, i.e. socially determined. The overlap with Taylor's argument for a shared horizon of meaning seems obvious, but luckily de Beauvoir takes another step ahead. As an existentialist, de Beauvoir also believed in the personal assignment for every single human being to create her own life *and* carry the full responsibility for all the choices involved. De Beauvoir wanted to find a way to combine our socially determined nature with individual freedom of choice and thus arrive at a socially conscientious, responsible human being. As a result, she drew some definite lines within which the possibilities we have creating our personal life's project are confined. An active attitude regarding our own lives and our social environment is crucial to de Beauvoir's understanding of freedom. To a certain extent, people must be socially free before they can practice their ontological freedom. It is our own responsibility, however, to seize the opportunity whenever and where-ever we can. Freedom is often hampered, but people are seldom totally subjugated on all sides. We must use every bit of leeway available to us. We must *will* ourselves free,<sup>15</sup> whereby our situation ceases to be something we must passively suffer.

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<sup>15</sup> De Beauvoir, *Een Moraal der Dubbelzinnigheid*, 1966, p. 15; Dutch translation of *Pour une morale de l'ambiguité*.

The willing of freedom is a twofold acceptance. On the one hand, one accepts one's freedom of choice; on the other hand, one accepts the fact that the available options are dependent on one's social environment. The human being is free in the choices he makes, but in actual practice those choices always assume the shape of a particular bond with the outside world. The making of a choice implies the existence of an actual project. This way, de Beauvoir merges our innate ontological freedom and our situated nature; our being bound by the world around us. We must use our freedom to chose our commitments ourselves. Freedom is ours only when we actively make it our own.

Our body determines our position in the world; it supplies us with the basis upon which we create our personal identity. Meanings attached to the body change with time, place and with the individual making her own choices. The body is particularly well suited to the expression of personal choices in favour of a certain identity. Circumcision, tattoos or a certain hairstyle are all different ways to claim an identity and secure access to the relevant social grouping. Other identities are physically given – like sexual identity whereby the division between the female and male body is considered an absolute. It is those physically determined identities that can easily conceal a personal choice. Appealing to an inevitable, inherent identity can be a most efficient means to mobilise people for certain political purposes. An active choice, say, in favour of a caring – typically feminine – profession is thus represented as simply the passive belonging tot a certain group (being in possession of a female body). This way, the fact that it is us who decide which meanings should be attached to the female body disappears from sight. Along with those meanings, we also chose the identities we attach to the body we were born with.

### *Identity as a product of daily life*

De Beauvoir believes that human life is a tangible existence; our life is determined by its daily reality, not by abstract patterns of thought or theories. Throughout her work, she approaches her subject matters from the point of view of our lived reality. This method she shares with the philosopher

Achille Mbembe. What inspires people in their daily lives is the key to their understanding of social and historical developments.

Mbembe elaborately describes what common daily African lives look like and the way this leads to – according to him – a specifically African form of identity-building. His work presents us with a succession of various images: the omnipresence of the autocrat by way of portraits and images. Salaries that have not been paid in a long time while people spend their working hours trying to provide for themselves elsewhere. Street scenes determined by abandoned building excavations – remnants of prestigious building projects that have not seen any work done in years.<sup>16</sup> Such a disintegrated reality, where things no longer seem to be what they are, leads people to split their identities. Identity is adjusted to the situations at hand, and because different situations in daily African life can confront people with such different demands, the various parts of an identity can be far apart.

De Beauvoir also emphasises the disintegration of life as people lead it. Daily life exists of an enormous amount of experiences without any structure of their own. Human existence is fragmented and the human being is an open-ended set of dissimilar elements. It is upon us to create a coherent image of ourselves out of this chaos of experiences and impressions. We must revise all different elements and recreate a coherent entity out of them. Such a ‘coherent entity’ is what de Beauvoir means by the phrase ‘a personal identity’.

## African identities

For Mbembe, the human assignment to create one’s own life assumes a totally different form. He views the creation of an identity exclusively in terms of struggle, a struggle to survive. Mbembe does not – as does Mudimbe – reject the idea of identity in itself, but he strongly opposes the notion of one African identity.

“We have to start from the assumption that identity formation is always a historical process. Which means that identities are not formed out of a vacuum. The material

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<sup>16</sup> Mbembe and Roitman, ‘Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis’, *Public Culture*, 1995, p. 328.

conditions in which people live have a serious impact on the way they imagine themselves. For most people in Africa, those material conditions of daily life are such that they have to grab at every opportunity to try and make it from one day to the other. In such a situation, it is more rational not to have one single loyalty. It is more rational to make sure that things are never completely closed. Because a maximisation of possibilities stems from the fact that these can always be renegotiated. One has to invest in multiple social relations in order to be able to confront the different facets of everyday imperatives. That is simply a practice of everyday life.”<sup>17</sup>

People resort to what Mbembe calls ‘arranging’ to be able to subsist. Through such practices, a whole new parallel reality is created: fraudulent identity cards, fake police officers clad in the official uniform, a lively trade in forged school reports and medical certificates etc. Every law is swamped by an arsenal of techniques, meant to circumvent and envelop that very same law, to the point of neutralising the legislation itself. Things no longer exist without their parallel.

“There is hardly a reality here without its double”, says Mbembe.<sup>18</sup>

Because of this, it is imperative to possess the capacity of being simultaneously for and against, of operating within and from without the system at the same time. This way, chances to finally achieve one’s aim are maximised. Mbembe is not describing incidents or imperfections of the system; it has become a general way of life, the daily negotiations necessary to ~~becoming~~ becoming a subject in Africa, says Mbembe, requires one to maintain several loyalties at once to be able to survive. It means the splitting of one’s identity, something which is in principle not specifically African. In other parts of the world, people do not possess a homogenous identity either. But in Africa’s case, the situation is extraordinary in that the pressure on people is much higher.

“The historical pressure is higher: the colonial period that left its imprints on what we could call the African psyche, the memories of the many centuries before colonisation and the postcolonial period. But also the pressure of the present socio-economical conditions. Identity in Africa is not simply split in the traditional western sense of the

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<sup>17</sup> Mbembe during an interview, Johannesburg, 22/ 6/ 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Mbembe & Roitman, ‘Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis’, *Public Culture*, 1995: 340.

term, but the subject is somewhat pulled in various directions simultaneously.”<sup>19</sup>

Although de Beauvoir realises that the past or our circumstances may severely confine us, her conception of a self-created identity predominantly appears to be a positive assignment which is part and parcel of human existence. Every single human being should, as an individual, create something out of life. Mbembe’s identity is more of a pragmatic answer to (extreme) daily difficulties, a short-term solution in a crisis-situation. Mbembe is convinced that subjectivity is always split. This does not elicit any value-judgement for him, he simply takes it as fact.<sup>20</sup> The unitary subject does not exist – not in Africa and not in Europe. In Africa though, this split is more acute and even necessary, because without it, daily life becomes an impossibility. With this, Mbembe cautiously formulates what makes an identity specifically African. The African identity is a *splintered* identity, wrought under exceptionally strong socio-economic pressures.

Is Mbembe’s identity a pragmatic solution to outside pressure, or might it also represent something which is worth preserving regardless of the circumstances? To Mbembe, this is completely irrelevant. In future, as in the present, the majority of people will not be able to escape the dynamics of trying to survive one day at the time.

“I just do not see how that will be different in the near future. People will keep composing their identities very mindful of past heritages and the vagaries of their daily encounter with what comes from outside.”<sup>21</sup>

Mbembe’s splintered identity is an instrument born of necessity, needed to face up to the crisis.

### Identity as evolutive

After the failure of Taylor’s culturally determined identity and Mudimbe’s project, the creation of an identity as an answer to the requirements of daily

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<sup>19</sup> Mbembe during an interview, Johannesburg, 22/ 6/ 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Mbembe during an interview, Johannesburg, 22/ 6/ 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Mbembe during an interview, Johannesburg, 22/ 6/ 2002.

life appears to be the most feasible analyses. Mbembe's specific interpretation, however, is less convincing. It seems hard to imagine people who, being forced by circumstances to acquire many different identities, no longer have any personal preferences. Will they not, on the basis of personal taste and characteristics, more easily opt for some identities than for others? Is it unthinkable that certain identity 'splinters' might correspond to other parts fairly well, while others are more separate? Because Mbembe renders the assumption of a certain identity as a purely pragmatic choice, he precludes any influence exercised by personal preferences or characteristics. Moreover, the choosing of an identity exclusively in reaction to outside demands denies any influence the different identities might exert on each-other.

Considering Mbembe's representation, it seems that all different parts of an identity operate completely independently. It is somewhat confusing, therefore, that Mbembe continues to speak of a subject, whereas his non-integrated subject really is a fragmented post-modern non-subject. What remains is the question whether people can manage a disintegrated identity without (wanting to) obtain some kind of coherence between the different parts. Mbembe himself seems to think that this is not the case after all:

"Now, I understand very well that being pulled in many directions at the same time might end up helping to produce schizophrenic subjects. But we cannot forget that at the same time, human societies always manage to constantly invent mechanisms for producing their own stability. Including in the midst of the worst of the crisis. We see it happening for example with the importance of churches in most urban parts of the continent. Religious organisations and churches have become somewhat a place where a certain sense of *agreement* within the fragments of the subject is under way."<sup>22</sup>

The usage of a term like 'agreement' implies that even Mbembe acknowledges that people do not simply accept a disintegrated identity, but will rather try to achieve a certain coherence within themselves. Apparently, people want to find a place where they can belong after all.

Generally speaking, the combination of a totally disintegrated human identity and a type of society that aspires to stability and coherence seems rather problematic. Society and identity-formation are strongly connected; a

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<sup>22</sup> Mbembe during an interview, Johannesburg, 22/ 6/ 2002. My italics.

social aspiration for coherence should therefore be expressed in the identity-concept itself. Such a concept should, along with the interpretation of identity as an answer to the demands posed by daily life, express the human longing for being – to use de Beauvoir’s phrase – a coherent entity as well. To be able to capture those two interpretations in one concept, I would like to suggest the use of the term *evolutive* identity. The term ‘evolutive’ refers to development, to a succession of events or living creatures. Every event (or living creature) originates from the one preceding it, but is at the same time subject to changes that transform it into a separate identity. It indicates growth and a capability to adjust. All these notions – development, growth, adjustment, change, life – touch upon a conception of identity that, in my opinion, does justice to people’s lived reality. The identity people are looking for, the place they can belong to, is never static or unequivocal. Our social environment constantly changes – often more quickly than we can grasp – while the human being itself is also far from stagnant. A human being passes through different phases in life, phases that all represent their own specific demands and needs. An identity, therefore, must adjust itself, must adapt to a changing situation, grow alongside a developing human being. In this way, identity should be viewed as a phenomenon whose characteristics are more like those of a life organism than those of dead matter. Our identity will come to a standstill only when we die.

An evolutive identity develops in accordance with our daily practice. Little by little, day by day, our identity changes – changes we are able to direct to a certain extent. The different phases each represent a separate identity, yet these identities are interconnected because they elaborate upon each other. This way an identity can be diverse *and* coherent at the same time.

### *Concluding remarks*

When positioning the four authors’ opinions on identity in a nutshell – passing over the necessary differentiations for conveniences sake – they separate into two different pairs. The one pair, Mbembe and Taylor view identity as a valuable achievement to be preserved. Whereas Taylor bases identity on

cultural singularity, Mbembe designates physical, daily necessity as the basis of identity-formation. The second pair, de Beauvoir and Mudimbe view identity as a pitfall we have to liberate ourselves from. The human being should conceive of himself as a project; it is our assignment to create our lives as human beings and not lapse into bad faith and irresponsibility. Whereas this project takes on totalitarian forms with Mudimbe, with de Beauvoir it can only unfold within physical, daily reality. An important common ground is indicated with this by both Mbembe and de Beauvoir and the significance they attached to daily life.

This line of approach represents for me a fruitful point of departure. It creates space to (re)think identity in terms of an evolving entity that is not fit for preservation as it is; something which Taylor promotes for example in the case of French-speaking Quebec. The French language is part of the cultural heritage of (part of) the Quebec community, *therefore* we should ensure the continued existence of its identity as French-speaking. Even, says Taylor, if it means compelling people to send their children to French-speaking schools to safeguard the survival of the French-speaking community.<sup>23</sup> But identity is not some unchanging object we can project on future generations. Identity must no longer be interpreted as a internal, tradition-laden entity that ought to be protected from influences coming from outside. If identity can be thought of as not something we directly inherit from the world our grandmothers and grandfathers inhabited, but as something we forge in dialogue with those that surround us in the here and now, it might present us with an escape out of some of the difficulties posed by a world in which mobility and migration are increasingly determining factors. In this respect, I would like to point out one more similarity between Mbembe and de Beauvoir. They both make use of literary language more than strictly philosophical argument. De Beauvoir – in her novels – and Mbembe – in his essays – show us people struggling with everyday life in a most expressive manner that appeals to our understanding and imagination. The actual state of affairs is presented in such a way that their texts sometimes invite a strong sense of recognition or identification. On the other hand, they are also able to formulate highly unfamiliar conditions in a manner that renders the situation intelligible even to the outsider. This achieve-

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<sup>23</sup> Taylor, ‘The Politics of Recognition’, in: *Multiculturalism*, 1994, p. 53.

ment is partly due to their willingness to seek out the boundaries of the philosophical discipline. Through their literary approach, Mbembe and de Beauvoir induce a spark of understanding that can travel across borders – cultural or otherwise. With this, they both make a valuable contribution to the ideals of intercultural philosophy.

