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“Incompleteness” and the Quest for Multiple Identities in South Africa

Bernard C. Lategan

Abstract: The article explores the contours of multiple identities in contrast to singular identities in situations of social complexity and cultural diversity. Nyamnjoh's concepts of “incompleteness” and “frontier Africans” imply an alternative approach to identity formation. Although the formation of one's own, singular identity is a necessary stage in the development of each individual, it has specific limitations. This is especially true in situations of complexity and diversity and where the achievement of social cohesion is an important goal. With reference to existing theories of identity formation, an alternative framework is proposed that is more appropriate for the dynamic, open-ended nature of identity and better suited to encourage the enrichment of identity. The role of imagination, a strategy for crossing borders (with reference to Clingman's concept of a “grammar of identity”), the search for commonality, and the effect of historical memory are discussed. Enriched and multiple identities are not achieved by replacement or exchange, but by widening (existing) singular identities into a more inclusive and diverse understanding of the self.

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In a recent article in the *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Francis Nyamnjoh argues that “incompleteness” is the normal order of things as far as the human condition is concerned. He makes the case for conviviality as a more suitable strategy for “frontier Africans” to enhance themselves and to become more efficacious in their relationships and sociality (Nyamnjoh 2015: 1). Underlying his claim is an alternative understanding of reality, of the dynamics of social relationships, and of the way identity is structured and experienced. The purpose of this article is to explore this last aspect: the implications of incompleteness and conviviality for the formation of identities – more specifically, for the formation of multiple in contrast to singular identities.

Before turning to the issue of identities, it is important to note the more generic thrust of Nyamnjoh’s argument. Although he presents his views in the first instance as an alternative to (mistaken) Westernised understandings of Africa and African culture, and as a protest against the dominant position Western modernity has attained even in non-Western contexts, his argument has a deeper draught that reaches down to essential elements of human existence. In his critique of the shortcomings of Western modernity’s concept of African worldviews, he brings to the surface fundamentals that are of constitutive importance also in other contexts and in other cultures. In the process, he explores what he calls “African potentials,” related to views of what constitutes reality, of mediating frontier modes of existence, and of conviviality as currency. Not only are these potentials important for understanding Africa, but they also “point the wider world in the direction of alternative and complementary modes of influence over and above the current predominant modes of coercive violence and control” (2015: 3).

For the purposes of this article, we are not so much interested in the distinction between different kinds of realities or what constitutes reality, but in the inevitable conclusion Nyamnjoh draws from this: the incompleteness of human existence. This incompleteness does not arise because of absences but because of possibilities. Using Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* as an illustration, he shows how we constantly strive to overcome the constraints of our own limited experience and look to those claiming the status of seers and frontier beings, in those imbued with larger than life clairvoyance and capacity to straddle worlds, navigate, negotiate and reconcile chasms. With the potency they avail us, we are able to activate ourselves to mitigate the inadequacies of the five senses, so that we too might perceive what is ordinarily lost to us in terms of the fullness and complexity of reality (2015: 4).

The realisation of incompleteness promotes the exploration of ways to complement ourselves with the added possibilities brought to us by the incompleteness of others. It challenges us to be “open-minded and open-ended in our claims and articulations of identities, being and belonging” (2015: 10) and to embrace our full potentialities without confining ourselves to exclusionary identities. But this requires the willingness to cross borders, which he sees as the hallmark of “frontier Africans” who “contest taken-for-granted and often institutionalised and bounded ideas and practices of being, belonging, places and spaces” (2015: 6). This suggests a nimble-footed approach to social action “in which interconnections, interrelationships, interdependence, collaboration, coproduction and compassion are emphasised” (2015: 8).

It is important to note that Nyamnjoh is not using the term “frontier Africans” to describe a specific geographically or historically situated group of people, but rather any person who exhibits this approach to his or her own identity and to their relations with others. Nyamnjoh writes from a postcolonial perspective, and his argument to a large extent advocates a more “equal” treatment of alternative forms of knowing and humanness within the knowledge paradigm. I argue that his views have specific relevance for the transition in South Africa, where the postcolonial discourse since 1994 has displayed many of the characteristics he describes, but also developed its own, unique contours – for example, in the form of the values embedded in the South African Constitution, the concept of *ubuntu*, and the goal of reconciliation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). In fact, Nyamnjoh is describing an attitude which presupposes a very specific understanding of identity – what I call a *multiple identity*. In what follows, I will explore the contours of that concept in more detail and return to some of Nyamnjoh’s ideas. In order to do this, we need to keep some theoretical notions of identity and identity formation in mind.

Theories of Identity Formation

The literature on identity and identity formation is vast (see, for example, Erikson 1966, 1980; Marcia 1966; Waterman 1984; Berzonsky 1990; Warde 1994; Cass 1996; Grotewald 1997; Van Huyssteen 2006; Goossens 2001; Steinberg 2008; and Morgan and Korobov 2012). The concept has been examined from all possible angles and by a variety of disciplines – philosophy, psychology, education, anthropology, history, law, and political science, just to mention the most prominent. Often, the focus is on the *process* of identity formation – either the chronological

sequence involved or the different stages of identity development. In this article, the focus is on the *epistemological frameworks* and the *hermeneutical strategies* used in the process. To place these specific aspects in context, it is necessary to expound on the various theories of identity formation.

General theories of development – whether of individuals or of groups – include as a rule an element of identity formation. The development of a person with a distinct personality is linked to different stages, each associated with certain characteristics. While the subjective experience of continuity as a person provides an element of stability, considerable changes can take place in the process. Individuals are defined in terms of their relationships to others, but also in terms of their own uniqueness. The experience of continuity and integrity as a person is accompanied by an awareness of difference and uniqueness with regard to others – but at the same time by an experience of solidarity with others. All these aspects contribute to and reinforce the specific individual's consciousness of selfhood. A wide variety of influences are at play here – genetic and biological factors, environmental stimuli, cultural effects, people who care for or harm us, good and bad experiences, and the choices we make. The centrality of context and history in identity formation cannot be denied – and yet, it is possible to transcend cultural and historical boundaries, as Nyamnjoh (2015: 7) so convincingly illustrates.

For Erikson (1966), identity formation plays a crucial role in the development of each individual. According to him, this development is marked by a series of crises or conflict situations. What the next stage is depends on how the individual responds to and deals with any specific crisis. For adolescents, the crisis is figuring out the kind of person they want to be, given the wide variety of possible (and often confusing) roles. If they do not succeed in this phase to develop their own, clearly distinguishable identity, it will be difficult to establish positive relationships with others later.

In the same vein, Marcia (1966) describes the progress of the adolescent in terms of one of four “statuses.” The individual explores various possibilities and eventually makes choices with regard to occupation, religion, sexual orientation, and a set of personal values. In the process, he or she can experience one of four statuses: identity diffusion (no clarity yet regarding the various choices and the direction for the future); identity foreclosure (making a choice, but without properly assessing whether it is a suitable identity); identity moratorium (the experience of an identity crisis and the reconsidering of options); and, identity achievement (when identity issues are resolved).

The result of this process is the establishment of a “self-concept” (in contrast to mere consciousness) – that is, the sum total of one’s knowledge and understanding of oneself. This self-concept includes biological, psychological, and social components that can be influenced by the individual’s attitudes, habits, beliefs, and values. These components cannot be reduced to a generalised self-concept, because each individual represents a unique combination of different types of identity. The most prominent of these are *cultural identity*, which refers to the typical ways things are done in terms of language, customs, dress, art, and life orientation; *ethnic/national identity*, which relates to a shared history and an assumed common genealogy, including physical markers such as appearance, race, and ethnicity, but also the ties to a particular physical area or land, state boundaries, and a religious tradition (the latter often overlaps with cultural and national identity, but sometimes cuts across these); and *gender identity*, which has to do not only with sanctioned attitudes and patterns of behaviour, but also with how individuals experience their sexuality.

It is clear that a wide variety of factors can play a role in this complex process of identity formation. The family (and especially one’s parents) has long been recognised as one of the dominant influences on the arousing awareness and emergent identity of a child. During adolescence, peer groups can exert a strong influence, often in confusing and extreme forms, such as the pressure to conform and the use of ridicule and exclusion, but these groups can also provide support, solidarity, friendship, and acceptance. Cognitive development plays an important role in identity formation, especially the ability to perform abstract thinking. Socio-cultural influences such as regional and national consciousness, economic status, and social environment all make their contribution.

Already at this early stage one feature stands out to which we will return repeatedly: human identity is inherently and structurally multifaceted and complex. Any attempt to reduce this complexity or to pursue a singular understanding of identity is bound to encounter difficulties.

What has been said so far pertains mainly to individual identity formation. A similar process is at work in the case of group identity formation, although other theoretical and procedural considerations come into play. Consequently, a distinction is usually made between identity formation and social identity formation (cf. e.g. Hogg, Terry, and White 1995). Despite differences, there are also similarities between the two theories. We shall concentrate here only on some aspects that are of specific significance for our theme. Both take the reflective nature of identity as the point of departure – that is, the ability to make the self an

object of reflection. The human subject can distance itself from others, place itself in a specific category, and name itself in various ways in distinction to other categories and classes. However, the basis for this self-identification differs. In social identity formation, the basis is the *group*. Members of the group see themselves as belonging to the same category and form an “in-group” in distinction to “out-groups.” In the case of individual identity formation, the basis is the *role* which individuals choose for themselves and the meaning and expectations coupled to this role (Stets and Burke 2000: 225).

For our purposes, it is important to note that, normally, different strategies are used in the formation of the two types of identity. In the case of social identity, the desired cohesion is achieved by a process of hominisation. Variation is underplayed or eliminated as much as possible and the emphasis is on the uniformity of the group. Differences become relevant only in relation to external relations in order to mark the distance from the out-group(s). Individual identity formation follows a strategy of differentiation. The profile of the individual takes shape in terms of the roles with which he or she identifies – in contrast to other possibilities. It also implies that the group is seen as “different.” In social identity theory, the group is seen as a collection of similar individuals holding similar views and sharing certain convictions. In individual identity theory, the group is understood as a collection of bonded individuals within which each individual fulfils unique functions. Things are approached from an individual’s own perspective, and interaction with other members of the group is a matter of negotiation (Stets and Burke 2000: 228).

From this follows that individual identity theory implies a divergent process, and social identity theory a convergent one. This becomes clearer when the preferred type of identity is activated – that is, when the individual or group act according to that identity in concrete situations. In the group, the collective identity sets the tone. The group functions as the master type to which the individual conforms and not vice versa. This process provides the ground structure for all stereotypes, which are always inclined towards generalisation, resulting in distortion and eventually caricature. It is only to be expected that when units become larger – for example, moving from group to nation to perhaps even “international state” (cf. Wendt 1944) – the distortion intensifies. A measure of “de-personalisation” takes place, as the identification shifts to the social category and away from the individual (cf. Hogg, Terry, and White 1995; Turner et al. 1987). “Depersonalization is the basic process underlying group phenomena such as social stereotyping, group cohesiveness, eth-

nocentrism, cooperation and altruism, emotional contagion, and collective action” (Stets and Burke 2000: 232).

In contrast, identity theory emphasises the full spectrum of choices available to the individual, expanding rather than limiting possibilities. In this respect, the contrast between expansion vs. limitation finds an important parallel in multiple vs. singular identity, as will become clearer later.

Certain conditions are conducive to the development of singular identities. In monocultures where language, cultural, religious, and political boundaries overlap to a large extent, pluralism is less of a threat and a singular identity can be maintained more easily. For minorities, especially neglected, suppressed, and wronged minorities, singular identity often provides the only basis for mobilisation. Identity politics (based on the assumed existence of a singular identity) consequently becomes the obvious strategy. But even in societies known for their plurality and diversity, a singular identity is sometimes touted as the ideal – ironically enough, as a counter to plurality. For Americans, their “melting pot” history is a matter of pride, precisely because they are first and foremost Americans. In South Africa, on the other hand, the slogan “Ex unitate vires” and the more recent (in itself contradictory) “Unity in diversity” are not able to paper over the cracks caused by the persistence of singular identities. We therefore have to look deeper into the tenacity of this type of identity.

Singular Identities: Unavoidable, Restrictive, and Dangerous

The basic limitations inherent in the idea of a singular identity can hardly be illustrated better than by referring to the example of Amin Malouf. As he himself points out, he is “poised between two countries, two or three languages and several cultural traditions” (Malouf 2000: 3). He was born in Lebanon, a country that for centuries has been both Muslim and Christian. His mother tongue is Arabic and culturally he grew up as a Muslim. However, his family originally belonged to the Melkite or Greek Catholic Church, which recognises the pope of Rome but retains some Byzantine traditions. On his father’s side of the family, there were some Protestant members who favoured the British and American schools in Lebanon. To counter this influence, his mother, a devout Roman Catholic, sent him to a Jesuit school where the language of instruction was French. The effect was that he later landed in Paris rather than in London or New York. When he started writing, it was in French, and he became known as an author in the French-speaking world.

When asked what he *really* is, French or Lebanese (or Christian or Muslim, or whether he prefers to speak French or Arabic), he could not in all honesty give an answer. He classifies himself as “x and y” rather than “x or y.” Very tellingly, Malouf does not see himself as being different persons. He has a strong consciousness of an integrated identity: “I haven’t got several identities. I’ve got just one, made up of many components combined together in a mixture that is unique to every individual” (Malouf 2000: 3).

Here, we are at the core of the difference between singular and multiple identities. But is Malouf’s case not an exception? To make matters even more complicated, singular and multiple are not merely exchangeable. In terms of identity theory, one’s own individual identity is *essential*. Without the process of individuation, becoming a separate person who functions as an independent member of society is just not possible. In fact, there is something seductive in the idea of singular identity. It holds the promise of penetrating to the core of things, to our deepest being, to our real self. It carries overtones of getting rid of the superficial and non-essential and creates expectations of purity.

But in this attractiveness of a singular identity also lie its limitations and its danger. Three main factors are involved: first, the inherent limitation of the logic of singularity itself; second, the (unintended) reversal that occurs when singularity turns into isolation; and, third, human nature itself.

As far as the first is concerned, in some situations, singular thinking and its accompanying twofold or binary structure can be extremely effective. Nobody can doubt the power of analytical thinking and the simple binary distinction between 0 and 1 that has enabled us to build immensely complicated networks and megastructures. The breathtaking scientific discoveries of our age would not have been possible without it. But this does not eliminate the inherent limitations of analytical thinking and binary structures. To illustrate this with only one example: Gilligan shows how binary thinking triggers (often unintentionally and unconsciously) a power play in gender relations. Although the components that make up binary contrasts like male versus female, white versus black, inside versus outside are in principle of equal value, these distinctions almost without exception develop evaluative associations like strong versus weak and good versus bad. In their turn, these associations are embedded in hierarchical structures, which in gender relations accord the dominant position to males, typical of patriarchal thinking. Gilligan’s protest against this way of thinking is based not only on the rational consideration that it is unjust, unequal, and exclusive, but also on the

huge emotional, psychological, and religious damage to society at large. “By splitting human qualities into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine,’ the gender binary forces dissociation, and the hierarchy undermines trust” (Gilligan 2014: 95).

When this binary structure is replaced by a more nuanced, complex way of thinking, power relations also change and it becomes natural to acknowledge and accept “feminine” components as part of male identity and “male” components as part of female identity. In a similar vein, Nyamnjoh suggests that we move beyond neat dichotomies in order to collapse the binaries, dualisms, and teleologies inherent in this kind of thinking (Nyamnjoh 2015: 7). This article will later return to this process of identity expansion.

Second, an (unintended) reversal can occur when the necessity of developing one’s own identity is no longer understood as a functional need, but becomes a goal in itself. When this happens, a subtle process is set in motion which irreversibly leads to separation, isolation, and intractable hostility – despite all good intentions and despite the fact that it is in flagrant disregard of all accepted norms of humanity.

This reversal and suspension of humanity, which is often associated with singular forms of identity, reveals the dark side of identity politics. Adam and Moodley (2013) describe graphically what happens when identity “goes wrong” and engenders xenophobia. Malouf (2000: 26) talks in this regard of “murderous or mortal identities. Identities that kill.” Any whiff of communalism disappears:

If they’d feel that “others” represent a threat to their own ethnic group or religion or nation, anything they might do to ward off that danger seems to them entirely legitimate. Even when they commit massacres they are convinced that they are merely doing what is necessary to save the lives of their nearest and dearest. (Malouf 2000: 27)

Even worse: these forms of inhumanity have been justified through the ages on religious grounds, whether it is the present-day imam who assures the suicide bomber that he undertakes this task to honour Allah, or the bishop in the Middle Ages who blesses the crusaders on their way to win back the holy places in Jerusalem from the control of the “heathens,” even if that should mean a bloodbath in the streets of the city (Wells 1965: 186).

Nobody has exposed the link between singular identity and violence as thoroughly as Amartya Sen in his *Identity and Violence*. He traces this relationship to reductionist thinking that gives rise to “singular affilia-

tion” and “solitary identities” which often culminate in violence (Sen 2006: xiv, 80–82).

A third way in which the concept of singular identity falls short has to do with human nature itself. Most forms of life – as biology teaches us – are complex. Any attempt to force life from complexity back to singularity is bound to fail and leads to the destruction of life itself. Although the analysis of components, the classification into categories, and the drawing of boundaries can serve useful purposes, they receive their respective distinctiveness and meaning only in contrast to other components, categories, and boundaries which form part of a wider network.

When the obsession with singularity, purity, and separateness is placed into the wider context of plurality, its harmful effects become more apparent. According to Sen (2006: 185), such an obsession contributes to the “miniaturization of human beings.” Clingman (2009: 5) even talks of a pathology governed by the idea of “singularity, whether considered in terms of ethnicity, nationality, or religion” which gives rise to conflict over land and borders, the building of (physical) walls, calls for “purity,” and religious fundamentalism set on enforcing this singularity. The result is the large-scale impoverishment or restriction of identity.

This is not just a question of suicide bombers, who blow up themselves and others as a form of political statement; there is the larger question of how many possibilities of “self” are sacrificed for the sake of singular identities. [...] But that tendency to the *one* or *singular* is consistent in its orientation: a way of ruling out transition, change, interaction, modulation, morphology, transformation. (Clingman 2009: 5; emphases in original)

This is the reason for the poor fit of singular identity into a world characterised by change, migration, diaspora, and exile, populated by cosmopolitan, postcolonial, nomadic, and multicultural identities. All of this underlines the need to rethink the “one” and the “many” in a context where the reality of difference does not exclude the possibility of solidarity.

Against this backdrop we can understand the persistent, often despairing, attempts to overcome the limitations of a singular identity, especially in the context of increasing globalisation. On the one hand, the flourishing of individual identities is a reaction to what is experienced as the levelling effect of globalisation. On the other hand, many yearn to identify with something more, something larger than the local context. For Malouf (2000: 78), this yearning is the quest for “a synthesis between the need for identity and the desire for universality.” The irony is that these attempts often fail because the desired universality is still couched in singular terms and imagery. The restrictions of local communities and

national boundaries are breached, but the ideal still remains *one* faith (Christianity, Islam, or something else), or *one* ideology (of whatever kind). The transcending of (local) singularity takes place in terms of a different (universal) singularity, but the frame of reference remains the same (cf. also Sen's description [2006: 156] of Britain's "plural monoculturalism").

It is especially in situations of cultural diversity, during phases of increased human migration, and in times of large-scale transformation that social cohesion comes under severe stress. It is then that the inadequacies of single identities to deal with these challenges become glaringly visible, as does the urgency of a more comprehensive and inclusive concept of being human alongside other human beings.

Little wonder that there is a longing for a new understanding of identity – one that presupposes wider liaisons and a fuller expression of humanity, one that can offer an alternative to the suffocation of fundamentalism on the one hand and the dispersion of people without direction on the other (Malouf 2000: 30–31, 84). Or, in the words of Nyamnjoh (2015: 7), an identity that accepts its incompleteness and uses it as a springboard to a fuller experience of the self.

Possibilities of a Multiple Identity

How is a new, multiple identity to be conceived? What would its features be? What about the conditions for its emergence? And how is it to be achieved?

The first condition – obvious, but nonetheless important to stress – is the acceptance of the dynamic, fluid, changing nature of identity itself. That which is experienced as constant and unbroken in the consciousness of the individual is something which in reality is subject to frequent, often drastic changes. These changes concern not only one's (normal) growth and movement through phases of development, but also one's sense of place, convictions, and patterns of behaviour. Malouf (2000: 11) provides a graphic description of how over a period of a few decades in one and the same city, Sarajevo, the identity of an individual could shift from being a Yugoslav, to Muslim, to Bosnian, to European. This is in reality an "enfolding of identity through space and time" (Clingman 2009: 4) that underscores the dynamic nature of the process. It calls for a willingness to experiment with multiple, layered, and shifting identities (Nyamnjoh 2015: 13).

It is important to emphasise at this point that the shift from singular to multiple identity is not a natural transition. In many respects, it is coun-

ter-intuitive and difficult for most people to achieve. Three factors are of crucial importance in this regard: attitude, framework, and process.

Attitude refers to the way in which identity is approached. The willingness to consider alternatives presupposes a previous (negative) experience with singularity. This could take many forms, but entails in its most basic form the discovery and acceptance of the limitations of singularity – or what Nyamnjoh would call its “incompleteness.” In the terminology of Ricoeur, the search for plurality presupposes the loss of a “first naiveté” – that is, the loss of the innocent belief and trust in a singular identity (Ricoeur 1967: 349; Wallace 1990). However, this breach of trust encompasses much more. It is informed by a critical consciousness that things cannot be taken at face value. What presents itself as “reality” is a constructed reality which should be approached with a healthy dose of scepticism. In the words of Maturana (1975: 315), “All the distinctions that we handle, conceptually or concretely, are made by us as observers: everything said is said by an observer to another observer.” This insight lies at the heart of the so-called “linguistic turn” – a discovery that had far-reaching consequences for philosophy, linguistics, literary theory, and historiography.

The transition from a singular to a multiple identity is not merely a matter of replacing an innocent consciousness with a critical one. The fact is that a “healthy” scepticism can also become an “unhealthy” variation. This happens when one, after the loss of the first naiveté, is unable to develop a “second naiveté.” One’s disappointment with a first love can result in a permanent distrust of relationships. In order to avoid any possibility of a second disappointment, one does not dare to enter into a relationship again. A second naiveté would mean that one nevertheless does take the risk of entering into a new relationship, well aware that also this time it might not work out. However, the scars of the past can be so deeply engrained in the individual or group that it becomes almost impossible to overcome them. Boer and Brit in South Africa, Catholic and Protestant in Ireland, Palestinian and Jew in the Middle East, and Muslim and Christian in Sarajevo are only a few examples of such seemingly unbridgeable divides.

By *frameworks*, we refer to the way in which identity is conceptualised and whether this conceptualisation provides for pluriformity in the first place. Restrictive frameworks and strategies are characterised by contraction, demarcation, entrenchment, defence, and isolation. In contrast, multiple identities presuppose a framework of openness and limitlessness, along with the use of strategies for building relational bridges, reaching out, crossing borders, and expanding one’s identity. It is a pro-

cess that strives for empathy, entering the life-world of the other, claiming (not in the sense of entitlement and demand, but in the sense of identifying with), investigating alternative possibilities, and exploring the full spectrum of being human.

Malouf (2000: 81) speaks in this regard of a “wider allegiance” and a “fuller vision of humanity.” The remarkable essay by Mbeki (1998: 31–36) “I am an African” articulates this fullness in moving, almost poetic language. The realisation of this enriched identity still remains an elusive ideal. In the same way, Costa-Pinta (2006: 4) criticises Sen for stressing the importance for an individual to cultivate a multiple identity without providing convincing ways that one could achieve this.

Multiple identities therefore require a *process* – or to put it differently, the willingness to undertake a journey. With the existing identity as the point of departure, the challenge is to follow the connecting strands as they lead to a wider network that constantly branches out yet simultaneously keeps the different parts connected. In the end, the individual is fully embedded in the interconnected web of life.

The remainder of the article explores some of the contours of such a journey, as well as possible ways to achieve a larger measure of plurality.

The Role of Imagination

The transition from (existing) singularity to (desired) plurality implies a willingness to explore alternatives. And in order for alternatives to become visible, the role of imagination is crucial. In this regard, we owe much to Husserl, who instigated a fundamental shift in thinking by liberating the *imago* at stake in *imaginatio* from its portraying or representative (and therefore secondary) status by emphasising the creative nature of imagination (Husserl 1983). Imagination is not a reflection of what already exists, but an exploration of what can be. The focus is not on perceptions of reality, but on what has not (yet) become reality.

Kearney (1991: 17) describes the significance of this shift as follows:

In this way, phenomenology rescues imagination from its “naturalistic” confusion with perception, and restores it to its essential role as a power capable of intending the unreal as if it were real, the absent as if it were present, the possible as if it were actual. Husserl thus strives to reverse the classical neglect of the unique character of imagination by describing it not as an intermediary storehouse of image-impressions but as a *sui generis* activity of our intentional relation to the world.

Imagination therefore works *productively* through the use of language (the verbal) rather than *reproductively* with the help of images (the visual) (cf. Lategan 1996 for a more detailed discussion).

With this move, Husserl ushered in a new understanding of the role of imagination, which ultimately goes back to the priority of the possible in relation to what is real (cf. Jüngel 1969). However, this “liberation” from reality can never be permanent and in the end we must find our way back to reality (Lategan 1996: 219). Ricoeur therefore emphasises the referential function of language that enables it to both transcend and refer back to reality. This is what he calls the “redescription of reality” through language (Ricoeur 1977: 220, 1979: 123, 1992: 302).

But what does this have to do with multiple identities? We are looking for an approach and framework that will enable the broadening and enrichment of the concept of identity in such a way that it does not disengage from reality, but transforms it. In this regard, language (more specifically, literary texts) has a special role to play. In his illuminating study on the “grammar of identity,” Clingman (2009) breaks new ground which is of special significance for our subject.

The Grammar of Identity

Clingman also wants to move beyond the limitations of a singular identity – something he experiences as restrictive and even pathological. The fixation on “the *one* or *singularity*” (2009: 5) with regard to place, orientation, perspective, and identity implies that different ways in which one can understand and realise oneself are sacrificed for the sake of “singular identities.” In the process, the possibilities of transition, change, interaction, modulation, and transformation – essential elements that enable life – are suppressed or cut off.

And still – the world is increasingly becoming “one” in the sense of a worldwide tendency towards conformity, triggering as a counter the flourishing of “local identities” as already described by Castells (1997). A naive praise of plurality and an optimistic belief in the inevitable blessings of multiculturalism are not helpful to resolve the deeper tension between the “one” and the “many,” or to deal effectively with plurality. What is needed is the willingness to live with the reality of difference without an intransigent maintenance of borders. It also implies the acceptance of differentiation without denying the possibility of relationships. Clingman writes in this regard,

We need a new way to understand the complexities of identity and location, for how they might be reconceived – something even

like a *mechanism* for rethinking their interactions. Is there an alternative way of constructing versions of self, self and other, individual and collectivity, collectivity and (other) collectivity, position and (other) position? (emphasis in original)

Clingman is convinced that fiction has an important contribution to make in this regard – a contribution which he develops further in terms of “the idea of transnational fiction, the grammar of identity and the nature of the boundary.”

Instead of giving a full analysis of his argument, we will concentrate only on those aspects that are of particular significance for our theme. Clingman (2009: 11) focuses on authors who in their personal life or in their work have transcended “national” boundaries – people like Conrad, Rushdie, Phillips, Seebal, Brontë, Rhys, Michaels, Gordimer, and Coetzee. According to Clingman, this does not refer to actual journeys, but to authors or their characters who have dared to cross borders, to enter unfamiliar and strange worlds, to explore and experiment with alternative ways of understanding reality. He is searching for new ways of “being and seeing. Novels working in this manner become not only a mode of exploring the world but also a kind of world to be explored.”

He discovers that underlying this process is a distinctive grammar which he calls the “syntax of the self.” This grammar is at work in different contexts – within an individual, between the self and the other, but also in wider configurations. Of great importance for our subject is that this process follows a specific sequence. Successful external sense constructions become possible only when the crossing of borders and the extension of the self have taken place *internally*.

As far as the process of identity expansion is concerned, Clingman (2009: 13–15) finds that authors mostly make use of metaphorical or metonymic strategies. Technically speaking, both the paradigmatic (vertical) axis of selection and the syntagmatic (horizontal) axis of combination are used to achieve this. In metaphorical constructions, the known is juxtaposed with the unknown; in metonymic combinations, the whole is linked to a part. In both cases, an expansion of identity takes place, facilitating appropriate behaviour in complex situations. The metonymic move or the strategy of combination has certain advantages, making it more suitable for transition, change, and expansion. In contrast, the strategy of replacement always carries with it the possibility of mere replacement and even exclusion, whereby the statement “I am x instead of y” is understood as the only possibility, thus discouraging change and expansion.

Clingman (2009: 15) writes,

It prevents combination *within* the self, and also any combination with others *beyond* the self. [...] The idea, rather, is to develop a sense of the “x–y” within ourselves, which might connect with the “y–x” in others, or even the “y–z.” Such a version does not override or negate difference within the self or in relation to others [...]. [...] But it does hold out the possibility of connection. And this is why so many of the writers in this study follow the metonymic, the syntactic, the *space* (direct or more distant) of encounter and combination within and between selves – because this is where the protocols and problems of a transitive version of identity are enacted. (emphases in original)

He illustrates the nature of this “transitive version of identity” with numerous examples from his selected authors. It shows at the same time that boundaries are always relative and even porous – they are in reality functional distinctions that are constantly transgressed. “It is the transition across these boundaries that produces meaning, and where meaning is not complete, or is deferred, then further navigations are both invited and required” (Clingman 2009: 22).

The views of Clingman resonate remarkably well with Nyamnjoh’s concept of Africans as “frontier beings” (2009: 3) who inhabit borderlands and who circulate and operate across borders. Their intent is not to defend them at all costs, but to test their limits and to dare to cross them.

The boundary is thus for Clingman also a horizon, a destination that is never quite reached. It does not represent closure, but signals a space where transition becomes possible. As already noted, transition and combination are basic preconditions for life. The (literary) text therefore acts as a kind of shifting mechanism. It is an extremely effective way to move its reader beyond existing reality and out of her or his comfort zone. The “proposed world” – which, according to Ricoeur, stretches “in front” of the text or lies in its extension – offers an alternative way of seeing the world and of understanding the self. This compels the reader to either accept or reject this possibility (Ricoeur 1976: 94).

There are two reasons why literary text is such an effective instrument to bring about change. First, it is a very persuasive way to present alternative world(s) in a journey around the world without even leaving home. Second, the presentation takes place in a “safe” or non-threatening environment – that is, without physical confrontation with reality and in the absence of the adversary.

Besides the indirect “detour” of a text, there are also other ways to achieve the expansion of identity. One is to make visible that which is hidden or to bring to life that which is dormant. A good example is the

work of Gilligan (2014), who attempts to change gender stereotyping by bringing the full spectrum of gender possibilities into play. In her research on the identity formation of adolescent girls and boys, she discovered that the typical gender concept is to a large extent the result of socialisation, but one of a very specific kind. It is a process in which the options of gender orientation are deliberately narrowed down by eliminating or de-activating “undesired” elements. Boys do not cry, do not show emotion, are not compassionate, and do not demonstrate a caring attitude. Girls are the “weaker sex”: they are not presumptuous or pushy, they do not exert themselves or strive for leadership roles. Through this process, components that are normally available are suppressed or branded as undesirable. Boys consequently suppress the “feminine” side of their personality and identity, while the opposite happens with girls.

In this case, the expansion of identity does not take the form of adding something new, but creating an awareness of what is already available. By appropriating these aspects, a more nuanced, complex, and complete identity becomes possible.

In Search of Communalism: Insights from South Africa

The need for a more inclusive understanding of identity is of course more acute in deeply divided societies, of which South Africa is a prime example. The idea of a singular, “pure” identity formed the bedrock of the sustained attempt over centuries to impose a divisive and unequal social structure along racial lines, leaving in its wake a deeply scarred humanity and an internally polarised society, steeped in mistrust and suspicion. The various initiatives after 1994 to “heal the nation” by necessity had to address all aspects of society and required the concerted efforts of government, the public and private sectors, and civil society. It was indeed a comprehensive programme affecting many levels and existing in very diverse formats. On the conceptual level, the image of the “rainbow nation” and unifying slogans like “Simunye” (“We are one”) were supported by new national symbols of unity – some (like the national anthem) bearing the very visible marks of an eclectic banding together of the most diverse components. The lodestar of intense and often traumatic sessions of the TRC was reconciliation and restoration. The Constitution, with its embedded values, aimed to safeguard an inclusive democracy and it provided the guidelines for transforming the justice system. The emphasis on *ubuntu* has led to imaginative developments in the field of jurisprudence (cf. van Marle and Motha 2013; Cornell 2014). New school curricula and national standards were introduced that aimed to restore equality in education and to provide the tools to deal

with a troubled past. In business and organisations, the “managing of diversity” and the development of common values became key strategies (cf. Jordaan 2007; Lategan 2011). For most institutions, transformation and empowerment were no longer optional, but translated into measurable targets. Sport was actively promoted as an alternative strategy to foster national pride and to achieve cohesion among diverse racial and social groups (cf. Grossberg et al. 2006: 58).

Data from recent surveys tracking this grand enterprise such as the South African Social Attitudes Report and the SA Reconciliation Barometer provide a varied (and often confusing) picture, one wrought with “fundamental contradictions and complexities” (Grossberg et al. 2006: 55). On the positive side, there is growing evidence of a sense of nationhood among South Africans (Grossberg et al. 2006: 71, Lefko-Everett et al. 2011: 47). Social identities are increasingly being shaped by class and occupation rather than by race and ethnicity (Grossberg et al. 2006: 72). Furthermore, there seems to be a growing acceptance of “dual identity” – that is, a combined subgroup and superordinate identity (Roefs 2006: 80). A strong national identity is frequently combined with strong race, class, or language identity, in line with the expectations of Mattes (1999), Adam and Moodley (1993), and Klandermans et al. (2001). “For instance, amongst black South Africans, race and national identity are positively correlated, as are language and national identity amongst Afrikaans speakers” (Roefs 2006: 87). As far as racism is concerned, almost three-fifths of South Africans felt that race relations improved in the first decade after 1994 (Roefs 2006: 90). But a strong correlation between national and group identity also has an effect. Among black South Africans, having a strong group identity and being part of the majority seems to lead to less perceived racism from other groups (Roefs 2006: 92).

Contradictions come to the fore in minority groups, where the idea of a national identity is more contested and where there is less evidence of a dual identity. Here, the link between race identity and perceived racism is much stronger – minorities indicate that they experience more racism from other groups. The issue of national identity seems “to be associated with some rivalry amongst minority groups in terms of maintaining each other’s stereotypes of racism” (Roefs 2006: 94).

At the same time there are negative signs, especially among young people. The Reconciliation Barometer of 2012 found that most young South Africans have not given up on the identities espoused by their parents’ generations in favour of one unifying identity (Lefko-Everett 2012: 49). According to a 2003 survey, both black and white younger people felt more discriminated against at the time of the survey than did

the older generations (Roefs 2006: 88). New and deepening sites of exclusion make their appearance – fault lines that should not be underestimated (Lefko-Everett et al. 2011: 33). Incidents of racism keep occurring, while protest movements like Rhodes Must Go and Open Stellenbosch emphasise and reinforce racial divisions. Conflict caused both by redress along racial rather than class lines and by marginalisation is on the rise (Durrheim 2010: 40–41). And most tellingly, this applies not only to relations within the country, but also to fellow Africans with the appearance of new waves of xenophobia (Adam and Moodley 2013).

The ideal of unity and a more inclusive identity is clearly still a very long way off. Even though there may be progress towards a “dual identity,” the striking fact is that this alternative is still couched in binary terms. This begs the question of whether the conceptual framework within which the issue of identity is normally addressed is not in itself contributing to the dilemma, hindering the transition to a multiple identity.

In this regard, a return to Nyamnjoh’s idea of “incompleteness” is of crucial importance. By making the unfinished nature of identity the very quality that constitutes it, every possibility of closure, binary opposition, or hierarchy is cut off at the root. Incompleteness defies pre-emptive closure. The self does not exist next to or in juxtaposition to the other, but is constituted in terms of the other, providing the basis for what Nyamnjoh calls “conviviality.”

Nobody has pursued the implications of incompleteness with more intensity than Antjie Krog. In her restless and relentless search for “indigenous humanism” (“humanness that is already there”), she grapples with the mystery of what makes us human and follows the thread of “interconnectedness” – where the “I is no longer itself/but discernable/multiples” (“Where I Become You” – cf. Krog 2011a, 2011b). In her latest work she goes a step further. Interconnectedness is the key not only to human existence, but to conviviality with nature (see the poems “to feed someone”; “how to I honour my union”; “an eland stands at a pool”; “convivium” [Krog 2014: 44, 45, 54, 80–82]).

Considerable progress has been made in conceptualising “multiple identity” and delineating its salient features. The remaining challenge is to find effective strategies to achieve such an enriched concept of identity. In this regard, an important stumbling block has been finding an effective way to deal with a traumatic past. Historical memory is one of the strongest influences on identity formation, all the more so because its impact does not necessarily fade over time, but seems to become more potent as time goes on.

Three factors bedevil the broadening of identity based on historical memory. The first is that this kind of identity formation is often accompanied by unprocessed trauma. Change becomes possible only when this trauma is confronted and dealt with in a purposeful and sustained way (cf. Gobodo-Madikizela 2003; Gobodo-Madikizela and van der Merwe 2007; and Rüsen 2010 for examples of the effect of unprocessed individual and group trauma).

Second, this is identity formation per negativum – that is, one's own identity is established in terms of what the enemy is not. All common features are filtered out, so the Scot becomes the antitype of the English person, the Jew of the Arab, the Boer of the Brit. These differences are pursued into the smallest details to preferences regarding sport, music, even choice of bank, making the finding of any common ground well-nigh impossible.

Third, the point of orientation remains the past, which obviously cannot be changed. Identities formed in terms of an unchangeable past are per definition unchangeable themselves.

A different kind of memory is therefore called for – a future-oriented memory (cf. Lategan 2010). When memory is without a future horizon, the present can only repeat the past. This approach does not entail denying or suppressing the past, but rather positioning it in a wider context and searching for the future possibilities of that past.

The transition to a wider, more inclusive identity is not an easy task. Our discussion of Clingman has shown what an important role fiction can play in changing perceptions and attitudes. *To Kill a Mockingbird* and (closer to home) *Die Swerfare van Poppie Nongena* are just two prominent examples. But there are also situations where the subtlety of fiction does not suffice and where direct confrontation with the pain and suffering caused by past actions is required. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (despite many shortcomings) did provide moments where the past was directly confronted, where perpetrator and victim looked each other in the eye and where a shift in perception and understanding took place – making identification with the other and even reconciliation possible.

Replacement or Enlargement? Leaving Behind or Taking With?

How does the process of identity formation take place in practice? Often, the terminology that is used complicates the process – terms like “exchange”, “replacement”, “sacrifice”, and even “loss.” Growth can

happen only – so it is assumed – when people let go of their historic or existing identity, when they take final leave of the past, when they renounce what they were or are. Nyamnjoh (2015: 8) calls this the “zero-sum game of completeness.”

Such an approach is another example of simplistic, “either/or” thinking. In a very revealing article, Ndebele (2014) writes about his longing to be known no longer as a “comrade,” even as “black,” but as simply “human.” It may seem as if he wants to exchange one identity for another, to be a “human being” rather than a “comrade.” But when we look closer (and as I confirmed in a personal conversation with him), this is not his intention at all. What he is protesting is the limited reach and temporal functionality of these (as he calls them) “single descriptors”: “Comrade,” “Black,” and “African.” (These limitations apply of course likewise to descriptors in a different key: “Boer,” “Afrikaner,” and “White”). While in one stage of his life he was proud to be accepted as a “comrade” in the “struggle,” and “blackness” was the symbol of a fierce independence and at the same time an expression of being “beautiful,” these “medals of honour” decreased in value during the period following the liberation of 1994 – exactly because of their limited scope and time-bound associations. The honorary title “South African black” underwent a subtle change:

Admired in the time of struggle, sometimes the object of adoration, sometimes of sympathy – and then the target of charity for whom, even in his own free country, he still has to be affirmed through special policies designed to advance him. (2014)

Ndebele further writes that the will to struggle has been replaced by the expectation of special treatment, leading to a culture of entitlement and the renunciation of the noble ideals of the liberation struggle. The result is that it is impossible to escape from the limiting effect of “blackness”: “If the South African ‘black’ is to be in pursuit of ‘blackness’ in perpetuity, when will he ever be free to be not black?” This is why it is so important to strive for the “universals” of being human – “to add to the cumulative value of the experience of being free in the specificity of their historical circumstances, where dream and effort are inseparable.”

He continues:

So, am I “black”? I once was, but no more. Am I an “African”? Yes, but with qualifications. Beyond the typifying singularity of the colonized “African,” there is no place any more for that “African.” Am I a “comrade”? Definitely not. That kind of struggle that described “comrades” is long over. Am I a “citizen”? Yes, although my voice and my actions have yet to be strong enough to assert

their formative constitutionality. Am I a “human being”? Resoundingly, yes! (2014)

How should such an expanded understanding of identity be translated into a different (colour) register? Is it also possible to bid farewell to “whiteness”? Yes, if being white is no longer the code for privilege and superiority. Am I a “Boer”? No – not if “Boer” signifies the singular identity that seeks its salvation in unachievable isolation. Yes, if it means a producer of essential commodities, where the distinction between “white” and “black” is becoming obsolete. Am I an “Afrikaner”? No – not if this label is based on the idea of a unique calling to be above other nations, on obsessing about the “wonder” of my language, and on having a right to special treatment and privileges. Yes, if I accept my position as the product of historical advantage and henceforth become actively involved in the building of an inclusive democracy. Am I an “African”? Yes, if the name signifies solidarity with the continent and that my roots lie here together with my fellow Africans of all other origins and cultures. “Citizen”? Yes, if this implies the active upholding of the Constitution and the exercise of civil responsibilities. “Human”? Absolutely – but then as embracing human existence in its totality, spanning all dimensions of space and time and celebrating the fullness of life.

Conclusion

Both singular and multiple identities can play an important role in the development of individual personhood and of the collective self-understanding of groups. There are contexts where the model of a single identity works well and fulfils a necessary function. However, in situations of cultural diversity and social transformation where social inclusion is a high priority, it is singularly unsuitable and can have even destructive consequences. In such contexts, pursuing a multiple identity both on the individual and the group level is a more effective strategy, not only because it is more suited to reach out and bridge divides, but also because it does not deny the existence of single identities and their relative importance. The cultivation of an enriched identity, therefore, does not mean the exchange of one (singular) identity for another, equally restricted identity. The goal is also not a vague and boring generality. It is, rather, a dynamic process of development, of a sense of incompleteness, of reorientation and constant critical evaluation, of change and on occasion even radical change. But this all happens with the constant awareness of being the same “I” through all these changes. It involves a journey that, as Ndebele indicated, proceeds *cumulatively* – not towards im-

poverishment and narrowness, but towards enrichment in order to explore the fullness of being human. A well-known Dutch saying goes: *Zoveel talen als ik kan, zoveel malen ben ik man* (“In as many ways as I can enrich my being human, in that many ways my life is enhanced”). In the end, it is all about completing our (shared) humanity.

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Incompleteness und das Streben nach multiplen Identitäten in Südafrika

Zusammenfassung: Der Autor dieses Beitrags versucht, die Konturen multipler im Gegensatz zu singulären Identitäten in Situationen sozialer Komplexität und kultureller Vielfalt zu ermitteln. Die theoretischen Konzepte Francis B. Nyamnjohs zu *incompleteness* und *frontier Africans* implizieren ein alternatives Verständnis von Identitätsbildung. Zwar ist die Bildung einer eigenen, singulären Identität eine notwendige Stufe der Persönlich-

keitsentwicklung, sie ist allerdings nicht immer ausreichend. Dies gilt insbesondere für komplexe und von großer Vielfalt gekennzeichnete Situationen, in denen sozialer Zusammenhalt besonders wichtig ist. Unter Bezug auf Theorien zur Identitätsbildung schlägt der Autor einen alternativen Ansatz vor, der dem dynamischen, nie abgeschlossenen Wesen der Identität Rechnung trägt und zur Identitätsbereicherung ermutigt. Er diskutiert die Rolle der Vorstellungskraft als Strategie der Grenzüberschreitung (unter Bezug auf Clingmans Konzept einer *grammar of identity*), das Bemühen um Gemeinsamkeit und den Einfluss des historischen Gedächtnisses. Aus seiner Sicht entstehen bereicherte und multiple Identitäten nicht durch Ersatz oder Austausch, sondern durch die Erweiterung von (existierenden) singulären Identitäten hin zu einem inklusiveren und facettenreicherem Verständnis des Selbst.

Schlagwörter: Südafrika, Identität, Rollenverständnis gesellschaftlicher Gruppen, Identitätskonflikt, Kulturelle Vielfalt, Autonomie