Is Democracy a 'Shared Value' that Unites Africa?

Narnia Bohler-Muller

In a bid by African leaders to move Africa towards integration and sustainable development, the Constitutive Act and the vision of the African Union (AU) were adopted at the turn of the millennium. In order to achieve these objectives, the AU established several organs mandated to develop and implement priority strategies and programmes, one of which is the African Union Commission (AUC). The AUC has developed two strategic plans that aim to meet the AU's objectives. In its second strategic plan (2009–2012), 'shared values' is mentioned as the programme planned for 2011. In this policy brief we take a critical look at the shared values theme. Taking into account the history of the AU, we explore ways in which the idea of shared values itself as a target for Africa is problematic, owing to the complexity and the particularity of values. The question is then asked as to whether democracy is indeed a shared African value that can unite Africa and Africans. In analysing the reluctance of AU member states to ratify and domesticate the Charter for Democracy, Elections and Governance, and the failures of the AU in dealing with the crises in Libya and the Côte d'Ivoire, it becomes clear that there is little consensus on the nature and importance of the value of democracy on the continent.

Introduction

The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was disbanded once it was decided that it had served its envisioned purpose of supporting liberation movements in the erstwhile African territories under colonialism and apartheid.[1] The African Union (AU) then came into existence as an organisation spearheading Africa's sustainable development and integration.[2] The vision of the AU is that of an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the global arena.[3]

During the Sixteenth Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union Commission (AUC), it was recommended that the theme 'Towards Greater Unity and Integration through Shared Values' be adopted for 2011.[4] The adoption of this theme is in line with the provisions contained in the Third Pillar of the Strategic Plan of 2009–2012, namely those of shared values.[5]

On paper, the AUC strategic plan is clear

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and well formulated and holds the potential to meet the laudable objectives contained therein. However, the problem rests with implementation, and as such the stakeholders in this plan play an important role. Key stakeholders have been identified as member states, acting through the Assembly of the Union, the Executive Council and the Permanent Representatives' Committee (PRC), all of which are engaged in policy making or involved in the executive functions of the union. Also in this category are the ministerial committees and the specialised technical committees. Other stakeholders include the commission staff, African citizens and the Diaspora, women, civil society, development and strategic partners, the private sector and the media. Even though these stakeholders do not all hold the same level of power, each has a specific role to play in the implementation of this plan and, in particular, the theme of shared values.

The success of AU plans primarily depends upon stakeholder buy-in and the political will to implement the plans. From the outset, the question arises as to how invested the different stakeholders are, and what they have to lose or gain in implementing the AUC's strategic plans. One of the main stumbling blocks, experienced by both the OAU and the AU, is the reluctance of many African leaders to involve the organisation in internal affairs, fearing that intervention in domestic affairs would threaten their authority.[6] The fact of the matter is that African citizens, even though identified as key stakeholders, have been predominantly excluded from many decision-making processes. African citizens are thus largely unaware of and/or uneducated about the workings of the AU. It is then questionable as to how citizens are able to hold their leaders accountable for any of the plans that have been drafted by the AU when the real power rests in the hands of heads of states, some of whom lack political and moral integrity.

In this brief we explore the challenges related to achieving the theme of shared values, and in particular the value of democracy in Africa, by adopting a postcolonial perspective that opens up spaces to accommodate multiple voices. Edward Said argues that the West's knowledge and representation of the rest of the world was part and parcel of its project of domination, where the West spoke for the 'Other'.[7] Although Said's argument specifically addresses Western domination, it can also be applied to the African context where the residual effects of colonialism remain. If African heads of states within the AU speak for the 'African people', they too could

possibly be excluding those that do not 'fit' the dominant representation of what it means to be African. In a 2007 TED talk the Nigerian poet Chris Abani talks about the importance of African narratives as stories told by Africans themselves. His message is, however, not about existing stories, but new stories of Africa that go beyond mere political rhetoric towards a space of ethical questioning, where what matters is 'the terms of humanity we bring to complicate every story'.[8] For Abani there are no essential 'Africas' or essential values, but fluid stories that are nuanced and complicated and context-bound.

The African Union Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, 2007

The AU strategic plan of 2009–2012 is based on four pillars which attempt to address the major current and future challenges facing the continent. The first two pillars are *Peace and Security*, and *Development, Integration and Cooperation*. The third pillar – under discussion here – is *Shared African Values*, and the fourth is *Institution and Capacity building*.[9] The rationale for the third pillar was to address the 'challenges of instituting the values of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, response to humanitarian situations, intra-African solidarity, gender equality, respect for African culture and protection of African cultural heritage'.[10] There are also challenges relating to enforcing AU legal instruments, as well as the necessity of promoting active participation in and contribution of all segments of African society to the continent's development and integration.[11] The drafters of the plan acknowledge that although there has been progress made by African states in instituting good governance, state institutions and their capacities remain weak, while the democracy project continues to be fragile and reversible, despite efforts to popularise the Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, as discussed in detail below.[12]

Although many African states have signed and ratified the key human rights instruments of the AU, many Africans are still unable to enjoy their basic human rights and freedoms, as they live in countries ruled by dictators who broadly ignore the will of the people, a central tenet of democracy.[13] However, the tide is turning, as has been illustrated by the uprisings in both Egypt and Tunisia, where informed citizens came together regardless of their differences to struggle and

Figure 1: Countries which have signed, ratified/acceded to the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance
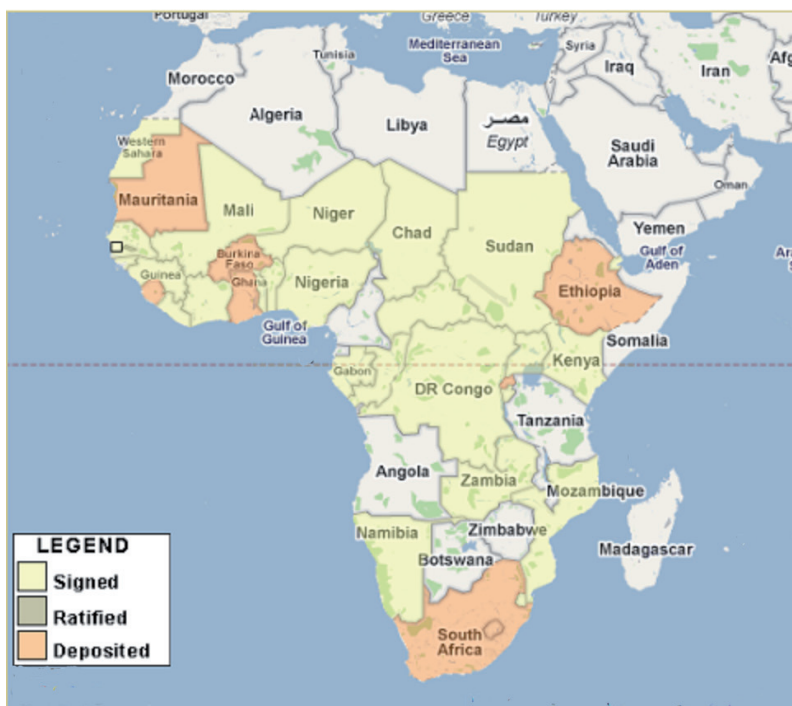
Source: AFRICAN UNION 2011 'List of countries which have signed, ratified/acceded to the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance', 27 January, http://www.au.int/en/sites/default/files/AFRICAN_CHARTER_ON_DEMOCRACY_ELECTIONS_AND_GOVERNANCE_0.pdf

protest together for the common goals of human rights, reform and an end to autocratic rule. These peoples' revolutions continue to spread to other countries in North Africa and the Middle East. The rallying call is for the end of authoritarian leadership and the beginning of democracy.

The AU Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, adopted in Addis Ababa in January 2007, has four main areas of focus:

● democracy, human rights and rule of law;
● elections and democratic institutions;
● unconstitutional changes of government; and
● political, economic and social governance.

Its main objectives are to reinforce commitment to democracy, development and peace, based on principles similar to those expressed in the AU Constitutive Act and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

In January 2007 it was agreed that the Democracy Charter would enter into force thirty (30) days after the deposit of fifteen instruments of ratification with the AU, which constitutes only 28,3 per cent of African states. To date, eight African states (15,1%) have signed, ratified and deposited this charter.

These statistics indicate that the charter has not come into force, and is therefore not legally binding, as only eight of the requisite fifteen countries have deposited the instrument of ratification with the AU. Notably, South Africa only deposited its ratification in December 2010, five years after the adoption of the charter. It is now estimated that ten states have ratified the charter, but there is no information available indicating if these reports are accurate, or the identity of the other two member states.

Chapter 3 of the Democracy Charter contains the underlying principles as already recognised in the Constitutive Act of the AU:

Article 3
State Parties shall implement this Charter in accordance with the following principles:

1. Respect for human rights and democratic principles;
2. Access to and exercise of state power in accordance with the constitution of the State Party and the principle of the rule of law;
3. Promotion of a system of government that is representative;
4. Holding of regular, transparent, free and fair elections;

Table 1: Countries which have signed, ratified/acceded to the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance

Country	Signed	Ratified	Deposited
Burkina Faso	02/08/2007	26/05/2010	06/07/2010
Ethiopia	28/12/2007	05/12/2008	06/01/2009
Ghana	15/01/2008	06/09/2010	19/10/2010
Lesotho	17/03/2010	30/06/2010	09/07/2010
Mauritania	29/01/2008	07/07/2008	28/07/2008
Rwanda	29/06/2007	09/07/2010	14/07/2010
South Africa	01/02/2010	24/12/2010	24/11/2011
Sierra Leone	17/06/2008	17/02/2009	08/12/2009

Source: The Electoral Institute for the Sustainability of Democracy in Africa (EISA) http://www.eisa.org.za/EISA/aucharter.htm.

5. Separation of powers;

6. Promotion of gender equality in public and private institutions;

7. Effective participation of citizens in democratic and development processes and in governance of public affairs;

8. Transparency and fairness in the management of public affairs;

9. Condemnation and rejection of acts of corruption, related offences and impunity;

10. Condemnation and total rejection of unconstitutional changes of government;

11. Strengthening political pluralism and recognising the role, rights and responsibilities of legally constituted political parties, including opposition political parties, which should be given a status under national law.

Chapter 5 contains provisions dealing with the development and maintenance of a 'culture of democracy and peace'. Article 11 provides that state parties must undertake to develop the necessary legislative and policy frameworks to establish and strengthen a culture of democracy and peace, and Article 12 mentions the necessity of implementing programmes and carrying out activities designed to promote democratic principles and practices as well as to consolidate a culture of democracy and peace. These programmes and activities should include promoting good governance; strengthening political institutions; creating conducive conditions for civil society organisations to exist and operate within the law; and integrating civic education into educational curricula. Article 13 of the charter states that 'State Parties shall take measures to ensure and

maintain political and social dialogue, as well as public trust and transparency between political leaders and the people, in order to consolidate democracy and peace'. Nowhere in this document is the phrase 'culture of democracy and peace' defined or explained.

The 2010 Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) Index of Democracy (see Figure 2) provides valuable information on the state of democracy in Africa by measuring five general categories: free and fair elections; civil liberties; functioning of government; political participation; and political culture. It is clear from a mere glance at the map that the state of democracy in Africa is far from ideal, despite numerous efforts to address the associated challenges. This becomes even more problematic in the light of the fact that democracy is a human right, as reflected in Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his [sic] country, directly or through freely chosen representatives … 3. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

The African [Banjul] Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, adopted on June 27, 1981 by the OAU, also provides in Article 13 (1) that '[e]very citizen shall have the right to participate freely in the government of his [sic] country ….'

State sovereignty, although already compromised by AU membership as well as membership

Figure 2: The 2010 Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) Index of Democracy

It is clear from a mere glance at the map that the state of democracy in Africa is far from ideal, despite numerous efforts to address the associated challenges.

of various other regional intergovernmental organisations, has been used as an argument against some of the tenets put forth in the Democracy Charter.[14] As the charter threatens to expose 'what lies within', it is not viewed favourably by some of the continent's leaders, and this is reflected in the lack of political will to ratify, domesticate and implement the provisions of the charter despite the fact that its roots are indigenous to Africa. It is a moot point whether the majority of African states have as yet achieved many of the goals they have committed to, and one may therefore question the usefulness or feasibility of adopting a document that raises the governance bar even further.[15] Many initiatives have attempted to address the problems faced by Africa, such as the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), Poverty Alleviation Strategies, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and so on. Therefore it cannot be said that there exists a lack of attention – or donor funding – when it comes to development issues on the continent. But these initiatives often suffer from lack of capacity or political will and an inability or failure to implement plans.

Is Democracy a Shared African Value?

Yes, the road to democracy is not easy. It is bumpy. And people learn about democracy by practicing democracy. And practicing democracy means development. Democracy itself is not a sure way to ensure good governance – Hitler came to power through the ballot box. But people learn from the experience and it takes time. What we can see now is that there are genuine steps towards democracy. We can see young people more and more engaged with politics. There is a sense of outrage at injustice,

a sense of outrage against corruption. These are very healthy feelings.[16]

– Mo Ibrahim

A 2009 report on the implementation of the Democracy Charter[17] stated that the ineffectiveness of African governments in significantly improving the human welfare of their people, or advancing the fundamental tenets of democracy, is an indication that only lip service is being paid to instruments such as the Democracy Charter, as genuine commitment to the provisions of the charter would expose some of the most glaring weaknesses, abuses and undemocratic tendencies of many African leaders.

The shared values espoused in the AU plan are identified as follows:

> At the individual level the values include those inherent in universal and inalienable human rights; basic freedoms; identity and opportunity; tolerance; participation in governance and development processes; reciprocal solidarity in times of need and sharing; dignity and respect; justice; sense of fairness; equality of persons; respect for the elderly; integrity; community cohesion and inclusive societies; and control of one's destiny. At national and regional levels, the values include: sovereignty; self-determination and independence; adherence to the rule of law; democracy and representation of the will of the people; care for the vulnerable; economic and social justice; public order, equality, fairness; solidarity of States; and sustainability of the environment.[18]

The nature and content of the above values may not be problematic in and of themselves, but It appears as if the AU, as a hierarchical body, is 'representing' Africans in the same way that the Indian elite, as alleged by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, proclaim themselves the best native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other.[19] What is forgotten in this process of representing the 'Other' is that the colonised subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous, one whose identity cannot be cast in stone.[20]

Let us consider 'tolerance' as a value identified by the AU. In 2010 media attention focused on the issue of tolerance of homosexuality in Africa, and particularly in Uganda. Responses by many Africans indicated a clear intolerance towards homosexuality and homosexuals, with many commenting that homosexuality is 'un-African', and that countries, like South Africa, where same-sex marriages are legalised, are being informed and influenced by Western thought.[21] The legalisation of same-sex marriages in South Africa was based upon the constitutional principle that one should respect, and even celebrate, differences in others so as to uphold their right to dignity and protect and respect their inherent human worth.[22] This approach is not a popular one on the continent, and the issue served to illustrate the complexity of values and value systems, and the dangers of a politics of identity that is based upon rigid, non-negotiable and predetermined criteria.

From the perspective of post-colonial theory, one could argue that the shared values chosen by the AUC to depict an African way of life are not there to address challenges faced by African people, but to represent Africa as a continent that is solid and united in its stance against interference from, *inter alia,* 'Western powers'. It can thus be perceived as a type of defence mechanism aimed at creating an impression of unity, whereas Africa is in reality a fragmented continent. Of particular concern is that despite celebrating the adoption of the Democracy Charter, a value recognised by the AU as a shared African value, almost three-quarters of African countries have not ratified the charter, and only 37 of 53 have even signed the charter, and during the sixteenth session, while the AU leaders were deliberating shared values, there were civilians dying as a result of the post-election violence in the Côte d'Ivoire.[23]

The January 2011 AU summit stated that,

> 'Africa's leadership has expressed the desire for continental unity and has been consistent in affirming that Africa has a common destiny … Democracy and governance, as shared values, entail collective responsibility as the basis for which Africans should address contemporary continental and global challenges. The values espoused are much more than a set of normative goals, they embody commitments to certain practices, procedures and institutional relationships between and within Member States.'[24]

As mentioned, the visions and ideals articulated by the AU in its strategic plans and treaties are laudable. These values have been articulated in various collective pronouncements and within binding instruments at the regional and continental levels, such as the Charter of the Organisation of African States; the African Union Constitutive Act; the Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation in Africa (CSSDCA);

the Abuja Treaty; the Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance; and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM).[25] However, despite consensus reached about 'collective responsibility' and what is good for Africa, the AU has proved unable to agree on the actions necessary to prevent the deaths of citizens in, for instance, Libya and the Côte d'Ivoire. This lack of consensus on humanitarian intervention on the continent is probably the worst failing of the AU, a failure predominantly caused by the fact that many Africans leaders place state sovereignty above the democratic sovereignty of their people.

As events have unfolded in North Africa in early 2011, the AU has failed dismally to take a firm position on the atrocities being committed in Libya in the democratic uprising against Gaddafi (chairman of the AU until the end of 2010) and in the Côte d'Ivoire, where post-election violence led to the loss of hundreds of lives. The inability of the AU to intervene and to *take responsibility* has revealed the organisation's lack of a coherent strategy in implementing its core objectives of ensuring peace, democracy and the protection of human rights on the continent. Despite the clear principles espoused in the 2009–2012 strategic plan and the Democracy Charter, the AU and its members merely watched as Africans died at the hands of other Africans, and then, when it was too late, criticised the West for intervening. On April 5, 2011, the AU chairperson, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, condemned foreign military intervention in the Côte d'Ivoire and Libya, saying that Africa must be allowed to manage its own affairs. He stated that 'Africa does not need any external influence. Africa must manage its own affairs … African problems cannot be resolved with a European, American or Asian view'.[26]

Mbasogo, the chairperson of the AU, is the president of Equatorial Guinea and his credentials as a leader are not much different from those of Gaddafi. Although the AU has a competent secretariat, high-level decisions require the consent of the heads of state. With such leadership, we cannot expect the AU to advance its objectives. When its chairmen do not uphold democratic principles and are not committed to the protection of human rights, how can we expect the AU as a body to be any different?

For the AU to be an effective organ for peace and democracy in Africa, and one that could prevent atrocities such as those taking place in Libya and the Côte d'Ivoire, it must also be willing and able to intervene on the basis of the very values that are claimed to be 'shared African values' and the 'shared responsibility' of member states.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The values that are espoused and embraced in numerous AU documents are mostly not reflected in the actions of the AU and many of its member states. These failings and failures of the AU need to be addressed, and it is clear that the system needs an overhaul. There are many suggestions as to how the AU could be reformed, but this is not the purpose of this brief. The purpose is to highlight the inability and/or reluctance of the AU to implement its own values and ideals and to protect democracy in Africa.

Perhaps this is based upon a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of democracy. Democracy cannot merely be understood as the holding of regular elections. The ballot box is ineffective if those that cast their votes are not free – from oppression, from war, from poverty, from an authoritarian state. A radical politics of democracy goes further, in that democracy is interpreted as a continuous struggle for freedom and equality. This understanding of democracy places the will of the people at the centre of the democratic project, and shifts emphasis from state sovereignty to the sovereignty of the people. It is also aimed at preventing complacency, as freedom is understood to be fragile and a right that should be jealously protected.

Since the inception of the AU in 2000 the momentum of democratisation throughout the continent has accelerated. More countries have adopted multiparty political systems and dictatorships; military regimes are becoming obsolete. However '[t]he issues at the heart of the document [Democracy Charter], such as what constitutes a 'democratic institution' or, more significantly, what and how do we define a 'culture of democracy', remain to some extent unexplained'.[27] Accordingly, popularising the Democracy Charter with ordinary citizens would perhaps begin a conversation that could lead to 'democratic systems that are, for lack of a better term, *indigenous to and owned by* the people of Africa'.[28]

In a dialogue on the ratification of the Democracy Charter in 2010, the Pan-African Parliament (PAP) requested all members of the parliament to implore their governments to sign, ratify and domesticate the Democracy Charter. The PAP also committed itself to collaborate with the AU, regional parliamentary bodies, national parliaments and civil society organisations to popularise the charter within the member states of the AU, so that African citizens could own the process.[29] In a resolution on electoral

processes and participatory governance in Africa (March 2011), the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) emphasises the importance of upholding democracy as a human right during a year when ten presidential elections, and numerous other local elections, are to take place on the continent.[30] The ACHPR notes that the primary purpose of elections is to achieve participatory governance without violence, and then goes on to state that it 'deplores the new trends in the development of national unity governments, which in some cases, legitimise undemocratic elections and paralyze [sic] political life'. The Commission further urges state parties to ratify the Democracy Charter and to respect its provisions.

These and other efforts to popularise the Democracy Charter are a move in the right direction, as it is strongly recommended that the principles of the charter be incorporated into national legislation and policies. However, efforts have been made since 2007 to convince member states to ratify the charter – with little success. Surely there is a stage when hard decisions must be made, decisions in the face of the death of Africans and the destruction of the continent. The AU has committed itself to the value of democracy and it must show its commitment through its actions, as ECOWAS did when it acted against violence inflicted against the citizens of the Côte d'Ivoire by freezing state assets and suspending banking facilities.

The value of democracy on the African continent is to an extent influenced by the belief that the 'Chief' rules for life, whereafter his sons inherit his power, but as Chief Albert Luthuli stated 'a chief is primarily a servant of his people. He is the voice of his people' (Chief Albert Luthuli, Groutville). Nelson Mandela has also pointed out the democratic nature of traditional leadership. Mandela made a case for an African version of democracy that takes into account traditional leadership structures and rebuilds shattered cultural pride by restoring some of Africa's most important cultural values, such as those expressed in the term *ubuntu*, to their rightful place. Mandela suggests that pride of place should be given to village-level discussion and decision making guided by the chief and his council. He describes the proceedings at the Thembu Great Place at Mquekezeni as an illustration:

'It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard; chief and subject; warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and labourer. People spoke without interruption, and the meetings lasted for many hours. The foundation of self-government was that all men [sic] were free to voice their opinions and were equal in their value as citizens.'[31]

It is submitted, however, that although traditional (consensual/communal) demo-cratic forms of leadership should not be ignored, it is also not useful to romanticise a past that cannot be recaptured in its totality, especially since there are unavoidable gender equality challenges related to this form of leadership. Rather, it is recommended as above that a more *radical* understanding of democracy be adopted, in which *differences* (contested values) are accepted as an important facet of the democratic process.[32] This position would encourage an attitude of open and critical reflection on values, whether they are 'shared' or 'African' (or not), and could avoid to some extent the dangers associated with abuses of state power in Africa:

' … whilst such an approach to shared values adoption is imperative as the momentum is established towards integration, we should not lose sight of the fact that there needs to be a balance between values communicated downwards and values that emerge from people-to-people engagements. We cannot but recognise that there is often a gap between continentally-espoused values and what unfolds within communities. This requires careful reflection, as contestations around shared values also embody dialogue and debate on African values vis-à-vis values absorbed from Africa's interactions with the global community. Finding the balance and ensuring that all perspectives are catered for remains important, as we mediate a policy path in a context of diversity and divergent perspectives.'

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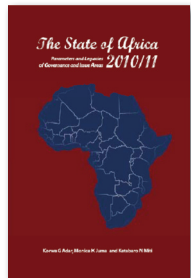**Africa Fast Facts**
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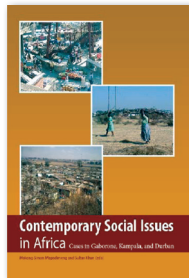
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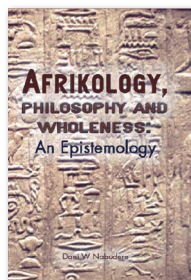Edited by Korwa Adar, Monica Juma and Katabaro Miti

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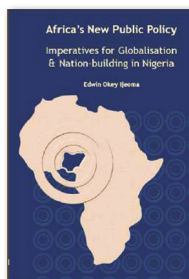Edited by Lesley Masters and Emmanuel Kisiangani

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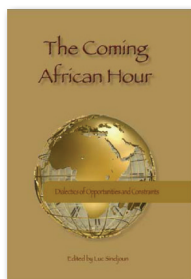
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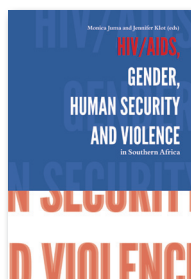Edited by Luc Sindjoun

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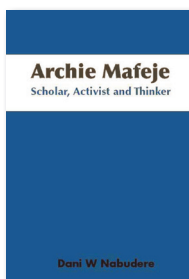**Imperatives for Globalisation & Nation-building in Nigeria**
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ISBN 9780798302531

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