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Trans-African identity: Cultural globalization and the role of the symbolic-aesthetic dimension in the present identity construction processes

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Globalization entails a process, in any case irreversible, of intensification of transnational, trans-societal and trans-cultural spaces, events, problems, economic transactions, conflicts and biographies, a process not necessarily unfolding in a centripetal, homogeneous and single way towards the formation of a single world society and culture but rather in a polycentric, multidimensional, “messy” way, dialectically contingent on the local. As far as the cultural dimension of globalization is concerned, the new concept of the “global” comes into being as an identity of synthesis whereby such different groups as black communities across the Atlantic reaffirm their feelings of belonging, reconstructing them before the invasion of the global into their lives. This synthesis between the global and the local takes place by means of a dichotomy: the global takes possession of the infrastructural, structural and ethic axiological levels, leading societies towards a certain uniformization; the local remains at the aesthetic level of symbols and icons, shaping self-referred differential identities. The paper aims at exploring one of this new, postmodern, aesthetic, disembodied from a concrete set of cultural practices: one that we have labeled as the trans-African or black trans-national identity: that of all the communities that claim an African descent around the world.

Key words: Black identity, cultural globalization, postmodernity, glocalization, africanity, trans-african.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization can be defined as the multidimensional set of processes by which a world-system (Wallerstein, 1992), working through a highly complex world network of relations, is coming into being, enacted by a myriad of transnational agents. It is a multidimensional phenomenon that involves many processes at many levels. Thus, we can talk of economic, ecological, political, cultural or even “biographical” (millions of individuals living transnational lives) driving forces in globalization, all interlinked in a systemic loop in which the logics of each dimension are interdependent of the rest (Wallerstein, 1992; Beck, 1999; Woods, 2000; Nederveen, 2009). This systemic approach of social processes and structures is, of course, nothing new in sociology or anthropology. All social systems work in this interdependent manner and the world system could not simply be an exception. In this paper we will focus on the cultural dimension of globalization, dimension that must be dealt with as an inseparable part of the world-system but also as having a certain degree of independence of

its own. There are authors, writing from the fields of anthropology, sociology and cultural studies (Giddens, 1990; Bauman, 1995; Robertson, 1995; Beck, 1999) that go some steps further in this direction, affirming the central position of culture in the present process of globalization. For authors like Giddens the common denominator of globalization, above all its different dimensions, genuinely lies, as a matter of fact, in the cultural realm: in the demise of a whole way of life, to be precise one that so far kept people and societies inside rigidly defined social compartments and the birth of a new one, characterized by the breaking up of socio-cultural frontiers: a kind of new social life that forces people to adapt, overcoming all kinds of separations (within the apparently separated worlds of the national States, religions, regions and continents) (Giddens, 1990). Undoubtedly, this is nothing but a process of the deepest cultural consequences; and of academic consequences, as well.

The issue of cultural globalization has raised a

considerate deal of controversy among social scientists (Nederveen, 2009), the mayor point of disagreement lying on the discussion about the universalizing trends of culture dynamics. Two major positions have emerged in this regard. The first position of this debate is the reductionist and “westernizing” perspective of globalization which, not much defended by scholars nowadays, seems to have become a sort of “folk knowledge” by means of the mass media. This view links straightforwardly globalization with a progressive and steady increasing of universalization (equals westernization) in the ways of living, value frames and identities around the world (Inkeles, 1975; Luhman, 1982; Giddens, 1990; Waters, 1995). Nowadays almost no social scientist could accept, at least not without reviewing it carefully, this theoretical perspective.

The second position rejects this unilineal XIXth century revisited evolutionism, substituting it with a multipolar relativist insight that sees globalization as a cultural hybridization process at a world scale (Robertson, 1995; Bauman, 1998; Tomlison, 1999; Beck, 1999; Nederveen, 2009). Ulrich Beck, for instance, denies the idea of globalization as a process implying the appearance of any national mega-society containing and encompassing all existing national societies but regards it, rather, as the building of a world horizon characterized by multiplicity, polycentrism, heterogeneity, and the lack of integration, something only existing as a process, as communication, as enactment (Beck, 1999). Indeed, examples of cultural globalization processes taking place among non-Western societies are progressively multiplying as the once peripheral actors enter the league of the “emergent” countries. Furthermore, we must as well reckon that the center of the system itself is far from being homogeneous and, thus, unable acting as a whole upon the periphery, fragmented as it is in social identities determined to defend themselves against processes of socio-economical globalization.

This is the case, for instance, of the African-American community in the U.S.A. that we will examine here; an identity and culture of its own that is now being exported worldwide. The majority of scholars, therefore, agree that cultural globalization does not imply the emergence of a world culture but a dialectic interaction between the local and the global which gives birth to glocal cultural scenarios, according to the neologism used by Roland Robertson (1995), new complex cultural hybrids (Nederveen, 2009), or a non totally coherent and culturally directed process (Tomlinson, 1999), permitting a multiplicity of combinations among apparently contradictory but nevertheless coexisting elements (universalism/particularism, fragmentations/new attachments, centralization/decentralization, etc). The globalization process, fuelled by the flow of capitals, commodities, information, ideas, institutions and people injects new cultural elements into the local societies but the resulting cocktail is always made in a different way at

each particular place. Globalisation does not mean, therefore, cultural unification (Baumann, 1998a). Cultural “glocalization” operates, thus, through an apparently contradictory de-localizing and re-localizing double process. On the one hand, glocalization de-localizes because it tears apart the boundaries which so far contained the traditional closed societies, getting them in contact with the others and bombarding them with alien elements circulating on a global context.

On the other hand, glocalization forces to rethink local identity and the sense of community which is still necessary to people, from the starting point of a recombination of elements, partly local and partly acquired during the process of globalization: a re-localization. Yet, this re-localizing process does not mean at all the resurgence of the local but a reinterpretation of de-traditionalized traditions within the global context, exchange, dialogue and transnational conflict (Giddens, 1990). Although in general terms I agree with this thesis, the cultural hybridization theory in globalization studies needs, in my view, to be revisited because it seems to fall short of some nuanced insights absolutely crucial to understand the logic of present cultural processes. In the following pages we will try to give theories advocating globalization as a multicultural, non homogenizing process, a new development, by pointing out how the two main structural elements shaping collective identity (ethics and aesthetics) are currently undergoing a process of separation, with the first one converging into a universal/global ethics and the second one floating away in a multicultural drift that leads to the formation of disembodied, purely aesthetical identities. The paper will try to illustrate this theoretical thesis by examining the emergence of one of those disembodied identities: a globalized African (or black) identity that we have called trans-African to distinguish it from the ethically and politically rooted one of pan-africanism.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is basically a theoretical essay built upon materials taken from other author’s texts and from our own reflections upon experiences of ethnographic observation in European, American (both North and Latin American) and African societies along the last 15 years. The methodology applied is that of reviewing the texts and using the ethnographical data provided by them (and by my own participant observation) to prop up and illustrate the theoretical hypothesis expounded in the introduction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theoretical reflections on the aesthetical disembodiment of identity

None of the aforementioned scholars reflecting on the cultural consequences of globalization seems to have formulated a key question. To which level of the cultural

horizon is the reconstruction/re-localization of cultural identities bound to happen? Or, put in other words, to what extent is the argument of the non-homogenization effects of globalization really sustainable? Alain Touraine seems partly to answer these questions with a theoretical position that might be considered as a sort of "Third Way" between the theories of homogenization and those of hybridization.

According to Touraine, one of the key processes taking place in the postmodern era is the dissociation of the culture realm from the economic and social ones, process he labels as de-socialization (Touraine, 1999). In the world of modernity that preceded us, he goes on, the individual's identity and values were shaped by his or her belonging to a predetermined social system and his or her role-status position within it. Social systems were the containers of all possible relations, organisms in which the different subsystems (infrastructural, structural, superstructural, to utilize the Neo-Marxist terminology) were reciprocally interdependent and mutually explainable. Today, says Touraine, this is no longer the case: globalization has deprived society of its totalizing role as a system encompassing the whole range of social relations.

The subsystems tend to become autonomous and undertake divergent directions: what we are witnessing nowadays is, on the one hand, an increasing homogenization on the level of economics and, to some extent, of the social and political organization mediated by the convergence towards a certain urban-industrial style of life in capitalist democratic states (or, at least, a homogenization of the expectations of achieving that models, expectations not equally fulfilled worldwide due to the irregular geometry of the world-system) and, on the other, divergent processes of identity revitalization to counteract, at the cultural level, the former centripetal forces. That's what Touraine speaks about when he talks of the breach opening between the instrumental and the symbolic worlds (Touraine, 1997). Touraine's view seems to modify substantially, by making this distinction, the theoretical frame expounded by the advocators of cultural heterogeneity; and we adhere to his thesis. Yet Touraine fails in making a second and crucial amendment to that most trendy theory of cultural globalization: a distinction absolutely key to understand the present identity reconstruction processes. It is this neglected distinction that we want to locate as the central idea of this paper.

In order to understand how globalization processes are affecting local cultures and identities the old Marxist structuralism classification does no longer suffice. It will be necessary to distinguish, within the Marxist concept of the superstructure, between, at the very least, two sub-levels that we have labeled as the ethic-axiological and the aesthetic-symbolic ones.

The former refers to the array of norms; ethics and world visions constituting the driving and legitimating forces of culturally patterned group behaviors; the latter

accounts for the symbols, icons and imagery that constitutes the external representation of cultures and the social groups enacting them. The first one is the signified, the second one the signifying of culture. In our "pre-globalized" past, these two superstructural levels were highly interdependent: symbols stood for the formal manifestation, the signifying, of culture, externalizing and rendering "visible" a whole fabric of beliefs and conducts. Thus, signified and signifying usually matched up perfectly: wearing a cross or a voodoo *gri-gri*, for instance, would identify the individual and his or her group as Christian or Animist, that is, as a subject conditioned (although maybe not fully determined) by a particular belief and *ethos*, by a way of conceiving the world and of acting upon it that "substantially" differed from those of the ones sporting a Muslim crescent or a Vedic *lingam*. Of course, the religious example is not the only one that can be invoked here: The same could be said of flags, as transcendental incarnations of the Fatherhood, that is, of national communities and their values, or other symbols for that matter. This identification between signified and signifying was such a strong one that it grew to acquire, for quite a long period of history, essentialist and sacralizing connotations. The individual's exhibition of icons other than those from their own social ascription or any kind of gesture in the way of relativizing their essential or transcendental character would be considered as a frontal attack against the whole social system these symbols stood for. Societies along history coined innumerable tags to label such antisocial conducts: irreverence, desecration, blasphemy, treachery and iconoclasm. But globalization and other processes of modernization such as secularization have come to split up these two inseparable levels of culture, progressively rendering them more and more autonomous. Or, to be more accurate.

It is the aesthetic level which is becoming increasingly autonomous, drifting away, in the sense of Touraine, from the rest of social levels, the ethic-axiological one included. For on the sphere of ethics, deep universalizing processes even if probably never bound to achieve total uniformity are also taking place already. Identity processes which are buttressed by differential world visions, encompassing both levels of the superstructure, the ethic and the aesthetic, tend nowadays to ebb away before the ubiquitous ocean of globalization. The more recalcitrant resistance to this high tide is the one put up by the fundamentalist movements of whichever kind (religious, nationalist, xenophobic, racist, etc.) but such projects are not likely to succeed in bringing cohesiveness to societies at large. According to their inner philosophies, born to face an outer world where isolation and disconnection are rapidly fading away, they just appear to be socially effective for small groups of illuminates but are very disruptive when applied to societies at large (let's think, for example, of the youngsters arrested in Iran for holding parties Western style (Kronos, 2010) or those

recently killed in Somalia for watching the Soccer World Cup (Laing, 2010). What we seem to witness on the main stream of historical changes, is, on the contrary, a worldwide mounting uniformity in the “life styles” that finally implies, to a certain extent, the convergence of the different axiological and worldview systems, and the withdrawal of identity feelings and self-awareness to an iconic realm.

The cohesion of groups is more and more built each day around mere aesthetic elements of imagery (a flag, a banner, a clothing fashion, a music style, etc.). I cannot conceive of a better example to illustrate the convergence towards a single worldwide “way of life” (whether actual or merely desired as a cultural myth) than the emergence of the underdevelopment consciousness in continents lagging behind in the industrialization process like Africa. Cold statistics show these countries as the poorest of the world. But figures are not as significant as the fact that most of their citizens really feel it that way.

This self-awareness of being “underdeveloped” is in itself an effect of globalization, a frustration stemming from the impossibility of satisfying culturally created needs by the cultural globalization process- that cannot be structurally achieved in the periphery of the world-system. Poverty in Africa, excruciating as it may seem to us in terms of the “objective” and “universal” international development standards, is nothing but a relative concept. Africans feel poor because they compare themselves with the center of the world-system as First World values and “ways of life”, delivered home by the mass media, have become their own personal goals. In our days, to put it in Arjun Appadurai’s words, *misery emerges and perpetuates itself under the rule of this market of imaginary lives as long as it is contained in the global circulation of images and prototypes* (Appadurai, 1996). Put it still another way, we can say that globalization has rushed into our lives to tear open the boundaries of individuals’ life expectations, previously shaped by local axiological systems, and has create a single trans-cultural horizon of personal fulfillment: A clear sign of belonging to a single social and cultural system. What is happening today can be perfectly compared with something already lived in the world history at a national level in past centuries: I am talking about the cultural patterns that, irradiating from national political capitals towards small towns and villages, created a single national set of life goals and values. In the past era of closed societies anything a person expected and demanded from life, his or her possible existential horizon in material as well as in spiritual terms, was somehow consistent with his embedding on a particular given society and the set of cultural expectations this society would provide.

In today’s world metasociety, with “regional” societies ripped open by the mass media, social expectations have, to certain extent, converged. The disproportioned

differences of life styles throughout the world cannot then be explained, as some have tried (Baumann, 1998b) in terms of a gaping abyss between the “globalized” rich and the “localized” poor but between unequal possibilities of action in a common cultural environment in which, either of them, rich and poor, are in fact culturally “globalized”, holding different amounts of cultural capital and different positions of access within the same cultural arena. Current Third World poverty is nothing but a consequence of globalization in two senses: in an objective one, because the logics of economic globalization tend to concentrate capital on the center of the system; and in a subjective one, too, because the unbalanced match between economic globalization and the global flow of information affects Third World people’s perception of their own situation in a way that worsens the unbalanced relationship by generating a collective psychosocial state of frustration: the self-perceived poverty. Although United Nations Development Program (UNDP) statistics show that Human Development has improved in general terms in all countries during the last two decades (UNDP, 2010), this underdevelopment consciousness has not receded but, quite to the contrary, it keeps steadily growing as more and more peasant traditional populations become culturally modernized. Faced with this penetration of a globalized horizon of individual self-fulfillment, of a new world-view and its ethic-axiological side effects, the world-system periphery has reacted in two main ways:

The pro-systemic reaction to globalized life expectations

It’s most conspicuous manifestation being, no doubt, migration. This would involve a certain rejection of the local in favor of the global but a one, nonetheless, still perfectly compatible with the proud of feeling different. One wants to be African but out of Africa, where a “modern”, comfortable life can finally be achieved. That means integration to the First World urban-industrial, highly westernized style of life while preserving an identity of their own which, according to our hypothesis, would be mainly reduced with time to an aesthetical veneer, to a mere aesthetics of “Africanity”, “Indianness”, “Latin Americanness”, etc. It’s the dream of many youngsters (and many over 40’s too) in underdeveloped countries. Facts talk by themselves. Just to give you an example: In Sierra Leone in the 90’s the main lottery prize was neither a car nor a handful of banknotes: it was a visa (let’s read also *vida*) to enter the United States. Of course we could also object that in the 90’s Sierra Leone was going through civil war, which was followed by the death of thousands, and that implying that someone in Sierra Leone would want to leave the country just because they fancied a westernized urban-industrial style of life might seem almost disrespectful to them.

Nonetheless, the fact that the lottery was basically a feature of urban life, of a capital city Freetown and its population mostly yet (until the 1999 rebel sack) unscathed by the ravages of war- sufficiently upholds my thesis. The problem of Freetowners, even in the middle of a rebel war that was wreaking havoc in the countryside, was of a different order: poverty.

The anti-systemic or isolationist reaction to globalized life expectations

To regain a sense of cultural coherence some people adhere to pre-globalized world visions and behavioral patterns inherited from the preceding closed and traditional societies. Among them stand out the above mentioned new fundamentalisms, which, as opposed to the old ones, do not have an autonomous origin but, rather, originate as a consequence, a side effect, of the very same process they intent to deny and “protect” themselves from. Their world views are not the original ones but just new re-contextualized reconstructions of social systems already gone, wrecked by globalization (Castells, 1997; Baumann, 2001). The hypothesis of the ethic-axiological homogenization was somehow implicit in authors such as Touraine and Beck but remained hidden in their too vague concept of culture, which, encompassing as it is, turns out to tell us very few about present identity reconstruction processes. Touraine says: *Mass culture penetrates in the realm of the private, occupying a great deal of it and, as a reaction, [it leads to] defend a cultural identity, which results in a rebirth of community* (Touraine, 1997). I agree with that but what we need to specify what “cultural” identity are we talking about. In other words, are ethnic identities always axiologically grounded? We want to answer these questions by presenting here what we regard as a new mechanism of identity construction, one basically taking place on these processes of *glocal* synthesis operating through globalization. We sustain the idea that *glocal* identities seem to be mainly born from an aesthetic-symbolic level, as a form of adherence to an identity stripped off of values, an identity built with mere external symbols which are not no longer signifying anything but the group identity itself.

In the following pages we will try to better buttress this idea by illustrating it with the analysis of the present phenomenon of construction of a black trans-national or trans-African identity, by means of a *kitsch* image generated by a “black” mass culture. The clue pointing out at a new form of African identity that would be presently on the making is offered by Ulrich Beck himself in his brilliant description of the Nottinghillgate Carnival in London and what it means for the British blacks participating in it: *To them Beck will tell us Africa stands for a vision, an idea from which they can extract elements for a black aesthetics, never pretending at the end of the*

day, to lay the bases of, create or renew a national African identity (Beck, 1999). What Beck fails to acknowledge, though, is that this black aesthetics is an identity in itself, one of the instances of the new breed of disembodied aesthetical identities that are being baked in the oven of postmodernity. And it is undoubtedly an African identity, although not a national or territorialized one. Without the shadow of the African myth lurking behind the British blacks (or, the American or Brazilian blacks, for that matter) these British blacks would not have much more substance than, let’s say, a club of blonde or freckled people. They constitute, instead, an ethnic community, sharing a collective identity. But it is a trans-African identity; it is a trans-African community, rather than an African or a pan-African one.

Which could possibly be the de-localized/de-contextualized and again re-localized/contextualized building blocks of these trans-African aesthetical identity? Coming up with an exhaustive list could be a very challenging endeavor, and surely one that goes beyond the scope of this paper. Beck again has identified some of the major ones and seems to coincide in this with authors as Alexander, who also studies the British black community (Alexander, 1996): race, the African aesthetic of dance and music and the archetype of “primitiveness” (only stashing the reality of an increasing globalization of vital expectations). This paper would like now to analyze the two of the mechanisms by which this aesthetical identity is construed: the “metaphorization” of race, and the emergence of a Neoafrican mass aesthetics.

The “metaphorization” of the “black” race

Race is the first and substantial element defining the trans-African (Carter, 1973; Kanneh, 1998) but race intended as a cultural construct, beyond its possible biological reality: a concept of race symbolically re-elaborated in the light of history and culture. Race as a metaphor of race, that is, genetics turned into an aesthetical icon. In the construction of this racial metaphor is not only the color of the skin that matters. Color is an identity metaphor of the utmost importance but is not, by any means, an all-inclusive one. Skin color is a necessary but not a sufficient requisite in the aesthetical logic of identity construction: It has to be articulated with an ethnicity marker. Thus, in the building of this global “black” community color is not generally applied to the Negroid Melanesian and aboriginal Australian populations, for instance. The label seems to apply only to those who can track their origins back to the African Diaspora. So race is important but not sufficient. This particular construction of the “black” race metaphor does not necessarily have racist or segregationist consequences, though (except, perhaps, in certain radical political movements such as the Black Panthers or the Nation of Islam in the U.S.A.) and does not involve the

idea of racial superiority or eugenics, either. It is just the feeling of self-identification given by a distinctive color of skin combined with a historical origin but, precisely for this reason, it turns out to be an essentialist metaphor bestowing self-adscription potentialities.

A global “black” mass kitsch culture

This basic “aesthetic” identity granted by a dark-colored skin is subsequently complemented and completed by the strengthening of a “black” mass culture which is currently mediating identity processes for the black populations of Africa, America and Europe. A trans-African mass culture based on the diffusion of icons and aesthetic elements such as music and fashion coming from different sources, most of them, I dare say, not African. In nightclubs and bars throughout Africa, on radio stations, on music shops, the same music is served, the same one we can enjoy in “black” clubs in the U.S.A., Jamaica, Martinique or Brazil. It is a *pot-pourri* of black North American music (funky, soul, rap, and hip hop), Jamaican reggae, African rhythms, French Caribbean souk, Brazilian samba, and, following at a distance, Latin *merengue* and *salsa* (usually more identified with Latin American than with black identity) and African own versions of salsa. All these musical expressions share two common denominators: a major one, rhythm, and its deputy, the voice, identifying landmarks that tag them as “black” music. The musical dimension is, thus, “ethnically” marked with the allegedly idiosyncratic African features of rhythm and voice: rhythmic and vocal music are built as African traits and the whole construct propped up by its opposition to the similarly handcrafted concept of as “white” music, which would be particularly lacking the rhythmic element (Kanneh 1998): *Voilà* a stereotypical interpretation of a cultural item which, being partly true, distorts reality by willing to appropriate itself of certain elements that are falsely regarded as essential and exclusive of the African heritage. Stereotyping processes like these lead to ironical confrontations with reality, when one takes into account, for instance, that most of the top *salsa* or *samba* singers are or have been white or that one of the best “negro” singers of all times was Elvis Presley.

The important point that must be underlined here is how music is establishing a major link for the construction of a trans-African identity, mechanisms of economic globalization being the mediators whereby this aesthetic element would be spreading out. The identification between black consciousness and “black” music, altogether with the radical call for the musical element (so important, as a matter of fact, in the expressiveness of African cultures) as a backup for identity, is, in some occasions, strong enough to reach levels of actual “musical xenophobia”. In the 90’s “white” music was practically ostracized from “black” clubs in the U.S.A. and this is

somehow still true in mainstream mass culture in Africa. An ethnographical fieldwork conducted by ourselves with African American tourists visiting Spain (unpublished) showed that they experienced a quite common reaction of surprise when they discovered how much people loved to listen to American funky, soul, rap and hip hop in Spain. That surprise was even stronger when they have come to know that there are actually Spanish groups releasing good funky, good rap and hip hop in our own language. Some of the interviewees confided us their impressions on this matter with words like “this is our music, why are you stealing it from us?” This kind of reactions seem, again, to imply a certain feeling of exclusivity *vis-à-vis* what is considered as “black only” music, perhaps a certain fear that its spreading out of the ethnic boundaries might lead to a “weakening” of the black identity itself. It is somehow as if they were assuming, or maybe only feeling, that if “black” music ever ceases to be black-only, if it ever loses its “ethnic” character, trans-Africans will be giving up an exclusive reference of identity, an identity they probably sense they need badly, in the absence of more solid elements to buttress it.

The major factory of this trans-African mass culture has its origin in the African American community in the U.S., more concretely in the big broadcasting and entertainment African American companies that produce racially targeted music, films and TV programs (television series pioneered by *The Bill Costby’s show* or *The fresh Prince of Belle air* in the 1980’s and 1990’s (Innis and Feagin, 1995; Means, 1998). As far as music is concerned, these companies tend to diversify the offer (which is less likely the case with television products) broadcasting not only black North American rhythms but also sponsoring, releasing and distributing worldwide African and Caribbean artists.

This is a good example of how cultural globalization, mediated and fuelled by the expansion of capital from center to periphery, doesn’t always walk in the westernizing direction: for the very center, as the increasing world interests of Black American lobbies illustrate, cannot at all be depicted nowadays as homogeneous. Moreover, it could even be affirmed, then, that this emerging trans-national black identity is nothing, in part, but the result of the interests of a certain capitalist class, that of mass media owners, whether African American or even Anglo-Saxon whites. And this is so because the elements to be transmitted are basically, as we have been pointing out from the beginning, of an aesthetic kind, that is, objects that can be commodified. This probably explains why music and fashion come so unseparately together: each music style is accompanied by its particular wear that becomes an identity icon as well, one that can be and is actually sold as a commodity.

As with music, fashion styles are diverse and originate in different places but the important thing is that they are all labeled “black”, symbols of that trans-African

community of identity: loose casual clothing and baseball caps worn back to front as in the American rap style, tee-shirts stamped with the Jamaican flag, the marijuana leaf or Bob Marley's face and dreadlocks hairdos from reggae imagery (now totally "in" among African youngsters), the *bubus* and long colorful African style cloaks European and American blacks wear some times when they intend to externalize their differential identity, etc.

Altogether with music and fashion other icons could be cited, all of them turned, like the former, into world symbols of trans-African identity: persons-symbol whose portraits are hanging in posters on the walls or are worn printed on people's clothes (Marcus Garvey, Bob Marley, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela) or a general common acknowledgment of the existence of certain recognizable "essential" features in "black" plastic arts such as "primitiveness" (show in its simple technique), plain and brilliant colors, naïve expressiveness, symbolism and frequent avoiding of naturalism and realism) (Vogel, 1986). All of them elements of what I would call a *kitsch* black mass culture which, along with all its sister *kitsch* cultures aiming to similar identity ascriptions (I am thinking now of the Native American *kitsch* or, the Mexican *kitsch*, to name just a few within the U.S. geographical area), constitute themselves an stereotyped pseudo-folklore drowning the authentic creativity of cultures by turning aesthetic expression, which should be unbounded and flexible, into a stiff starchy uniform all for the sake of conveying a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

The processes of cultural globalization, of polycentric nature, seem to be mediating, from the last decades, exchanges and links among black communities, African or acknowledging African descent, worldwide. The result is the appearance of trans-local or trans-African cultural space acting beyond the already historical pan-African level, operating not only above the frail African national identities, but even beyond the geographical reality of Africa itself: A symbolic space acting as an identity reference, independent from any economic, political or societal organization, for a good part of those communities. We are talking about a post-modern identity construct based fundamentally on aesthetic-symbolic elements. A notion of Africa that regards Africa as a hyper reality not necessarily confined to its delimited geographic boundaries: Africa as a disembodied symbolic territory that becomes again embodied in the bodies of its sons and daughters wherever these might be. Africa becomes, thus, a delocalized territory, almost omnipresent throughout the world but reduced to an aesthetical nature, pure "software" flowing in the net society, freed from the weight of maintaining its "hardware" and the constraints that such an endeavor

entails (like the obligation to construct an African political agenda or to stick to African traditional codes of behavior).

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