Has Africa got anything to say?  
African contributions to the theoretical development of International Relations: a preliminary investigation

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Introduction

The past decade has seen a number of studies questioning the applicability of existing IR theory to, and lamenting the neglect of the developing world, and Africa in particular, in IR theory. This paper attempts to go beyond this (well-founded) criticism, and instead of asking what IR theory should be doing to address the concerns of the developing world, ask how contributions from Africa could potentially enrich our understanding of IR. In other words, how could the experiences of Africa and the scholarship generated by Africans contribute to a greater understanding of IR? The focus here is, therefore, to borrow from Arlene Tickner (2003a:300), on the developing world as an agent of IR knowledge rather than an object of IR study, and on exploring MacLean’s claim that “Africa’s experiences…provide insights for the development of IR theory and policy far beyond the continent” (2001:150).

If one considers the interest in indigenous knowledge from Africa and the rest of the developing world in relation to fields such as natural medicine, it becomes clear that it is not a novel idea that knowledge from the non-western world can influence the west. As Howell notes, “contrary to most commentators [on the globalization of culture]…who perceive this process as a unidirectional flow of knowledge from the First to the Third Worlds, the flow also goes the other way – from less powerful, non-western societies to powerful, western ones”. She looks at examples where knowledge from the Third World has affected the First World, and argues that “such influences need not be superficial, but may strike at profound experiential levels by opening cultural lacunae which dramatically

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1 From a panel discussion by the same name held at the Frankfurt book fair, 11 October 2007.
shift the parameters of previous understanding” (Howell, 1995:165). Another case in point may be the impact of eastern religion and art on the West.

Regrettably this interest in how existing (western) knowledge could be enriched by indigenous knowledge and practices has not extended to the field of IR. Mainstream scholars in particular see little value in making an effort to draw on lessons from the periphery. The idea that scholars in the core of the field (mainly the US and UK) are the innovators of theory, while scholars in the periphery (Africa and the rest of the developing world, and also to an extent other countries falling outside of the Anglo-American tradition) are mere consumers of theory, has been widespread in the field. Unfortunately, as Mallavarapu (2005:1) points out, this view is not only held in the core: scholars from the developing world “have been complicit in viewing themselves as mere recipients of a discourse shaped elsewhere”.

This suggests one obstacle in our exploration of possible African contributions to IR theory. Of course there are many other constraints, both external (such as the gatekeeping practices so prevalent in our field), as well as internal (including a lack of resources and the view that theorising is unaffordable in the context of Africa, where urgent problems require urgent policy solutions). The issue of constraints was explored in depth in a previous paper (see Smith and van der Westhuizen, 2005) and will therefore not be the focus here.

**What is African knowledge?**

Before exploring the scope of possible African contributions to the understanding of IR, it is important to clarify what is meant by ‘African’ in this context, and the related question of who can speak on behalf of Africa(ns). This has been a question which many scholars have struggled with, and any consensus on the issue remains elusive.

During the era of colonialism, part of the colonial project was portraying Africans as unable to speak for themselves. During the struggle for independence and subsequent gaining of sovereignty, African voices were heard. Some, like Boele van Hensbroek, note that this changed again in the 1970s and 1980s onwards, when the new political situation in Africa and the increased influence of external actors through, for example, foreign aid, “changed the idea of who could speak on behalf of Africa”. In addition, “as the speaker changed so did the words” (1999:168). The debate about who can speak legitimately about Africa continues, and extends to more general questions in the social sciences about who can (and should) study what, who can speak on whose behalf, the value of anthropological methods like embedded research, etc.

On the one hand, there are those whose views on the issue are quite radical. In his reflection on V.Y. Mudimbe’s *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*, Jacob Carruthers laments the fact that European intellectuals, through colonial practices, began to “exercise dominance over African knowledge” (1996:6). He identifies the education of Europeanized African intellectuals as the final phase of the white supremacy project. His calls for the repossession of African thought is
a radical one: “the revival of African thought is a job for Africans only; that is only Africans can do it. If Europeans do it, it would only mean that they defeated us again” (1996:9). The potential role for non-Africans in generating African contributions thus appears limited from his point of view.

Others advance a more moderate view. In their article on knowledge production and publishing in Africa, Zegeye and Vambe ask the question, “What is African knowledge? (2006:336)” and continue, “if a non-African writer writes about Africa, is this African knowledge? If an African writer writes about Africa in a European language, is this African knowledge? (2006:342). Significantly, they recognise that “the issue at stake is how to broaden the theoretical catchment area from which African knowledge can originate” (2006:342). This is similar to the position reached at an international symposium on globalisation and the social sciences in Africa in 1998, where the question of what African knowledge is also came up. The suggestion was that there is no such thing as “unique African knowledge”; instead, “African knowledge owes its development to a variety of intellectual traditions that have both extraneous and endogenous origins” (Nieftagodien, 1998:232). Furthermore, it was held that “the production of African knowledge is an exercise that cannot be defined geographically and any attempt to seal off African knowledge production would not only be futile, it would also be a very damaging exercise. This applies not only to Africa’s intellectual relationship with the West, but also to those African and Africanist intellectuals plying their trade in Western institutions” (Nieftagodien, 1998:232-233).

In a similar vein, Anyidoho points out that, according to some scholarship, “there is no best location to produce knowledge: that, rather, there exist multiple, equally viable locations” (2006:160). This is largely the view put forward in this paper, namely that we should not be constrained by exclusivity, as this would be counter-productive to the aims of this project. Instead, we should recognise the plurality of the potential sources of African knowledge, and promote alternative sites of knowledge construction in general.

It is necessary to comment briefly on the generic use of terms such as ‘African contributions’, ‘African insights’, ‘the African experience’, etc. throughout this paper. The African continent is, of course, marked by extreme diversity. In this way, the lived experience of someone living in a refugee camp in southern Sudan will be significantly different to that of someone living in a middle-class suburb in South Africa. Consequently, the worldviews and insights emanating from these different contexts will be equally diverse. The broad term ‘African’ is thus employed with a full awareness of the fact that its usage constitutes a major generalisation. The justification for continuing to do so, however, is that in the context of this paper, the adjective ‘African’ reflects commonalities between different African experiences, in the sense that they are all regarded as peripheral to, and largely excluded from, the core of IR.

Related questions asked by Anyidoho (2006:156) regarding “What is African about African Studies?” and “What is the link (should there be a link?) between location and scholarship, between belonging and knowledge production, between identity and representation?” are relevant in this context. Before embarking further on the quest to
discover potential African contributions to IR theory, this issue of whether, on the basis of factors like culture and context, African insights into IR are different to say, European insights, needs to be explored further.

**Are African insights significantly different?**

The answer to this question provides the rationale for either continuing this paper or simply abandoning it as a meaningless exercise. The underlying argument (the validity of which also needs to be questioned) is that only if African insights are significantly different from existing IR will they be able to make a worthwhile contribution to the field. It is an issue which Pinar Bilgin deals with extensively in her recent article³.

Bilgin questions the “prevalent assumptions of ‘difference’ between ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ approaches to world politics” on the grounds that Western and non-Western experiences and their interpretations have become so interlaced that “‘non-Western’ ways of thinking about and doing world politics are not always devoid of ‘Western’ concepts and theories” (2008:6). She calls on proponents of non-Western insights into IR to “consider the possibility that one’s efforts to think past ‘Western’ IR are not guaranteed to get one a place where ‘different’ ways of thinking about and doing politics preside” (2008:7), and that much of it is little more than a mimicry of Western approaches.

This question becomes particularly pertinent in light of the tremendous influence colonialism has had on the African continent, with some commentators arguing that western knowledge was imposed through the colonial project, and that all African scholarship since has inevitably been a reflection of the imposition of western knowledge. Admittedly, in an increasingly globalised world it is difficult to determine what is purely Western or non-Western as history has been strewn with cultural, social, political and intellectual cross-pollination.

However, the point made earlier that the influence has not always been uni-directional must be re-stated here. In particular, ‘common-sense’ assumptions about the western origins of certain ideas need to be questioned. Bilgin (2008:7-8), for example, notes how certain concepts and traditions attributed to Western scholarship (such as postmodernism or liberal democracy) in fact have non-Western roots, or in the case of democracy, “multiple places of birth”. Similarly, Clark (2001:88) reminds us that even realism does not have its roots exclusively in Western history or thought, with China’s Shang Tzu and Han Fei-tzu, India’s Kautilya, as well as the ‘Western’ Thucydides counted amongst early realists.

Boele van Hensbroek notes that the democratic turn in African political thought in the 1980s was considered by some as “simply a mimic of the West and a deviation from African thought rather than its newest form” (1999:171). He goes on to ask, however, “Why would Africans develop democratic lines of thought only by imitating Europeans and not through their own force of mind? There is no valid reason to assume that African

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thinkers are intrinsically “unliberal” and can only develop liberal ideas through mimicry or that liberalism is intrinsically “un-African” (1999:171).

Of course, given various constraints, not least of which is a lack of resources, it is a fact that developing countries are not as proficient in theoretical research as developed countries. In the same way that other products are imported, and perhaps copied, this is also the case with knowledge. And yet contextual factors (geopolitical realities, culture etc) undeniably have an influence on the way in which imported knowledge is interpreted, as well as the nature of new knowledge generated.

So while it is clear that the view “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” (Rudyard Kipling, quoted in Chan, 1999:179) no longer holds true, the fact remains that, despite centuries of interaction and cross-pollination of ideas, significant differences remain between East and West, or perhaps more aptly, North and South.

The view of this author is therefore that there are good reasons to believe that African and other developing world insights into IR will be significantly different to the ones we are familiar with, and that they warrant an exploration. The aim here is thus partly to show how Africans’ different worldviews and lives experiences can enrich our understanding of IR. Africa’s difference thus becomes a tool to give us new insights into the workings of international relations not just in Africa, but in other parts of the world as well. The ultimate aim is to open up the possibilities for more inclusive theorising.

I base my argument on, amongst others, the frameworks put forward by Arlene Tickner (2003a), Knud Erik Jorgenson (2000) and Nana Akua Anyidoho (2006). Surprisingly perhaps, one of the leading figures of Classical Realism, Hans Morgenthau, underlined the notion that “The perspective of the observer determines what can be known and how it is to be understood” (1959:21).

There are different ways of describing what makes looking at IR from outside the core a fundamentally different endeavour, with resultantly different outcomes. The contextual differences (in terms of the political, social, economic and cultural environment) between Africa and the USA or the UK, for example, have obvious implications for various aspects of the practice and study of international relations. If one starts from the assumption that context plays a role, then the argument that numerous scholars have made (notably Lemke, 2003; Dunn and Shaw, 2001; Neumann, 1998) that one of the main differences between international relations in Africa and in the rest of the world is that many of Africa’s states are states in name only becomes an important one.

Similarly, different cultures inevitably perceive the way the world works differently. This is substantiated by Mazrui (1980:47) who holds that “culture provides lenses of perception, a way of looking at reality, a world view”. In relation to Bilgin’s concern, however, one could of course ask how the influence of the west has impacted on African culture, and subsequently on African views of the world.
What Tickner calls “everyday life” refers to the idea that knowledge of the world is also largely a product of everyday experiences, or one’s lived experience. Based on the challenge faced or perceived on a daily basis, different questions are asked and different topics are prioritised. For example, in large parts of the global South, nuclear non-proliferation and terrorism are less important than are issues of poverty, marginalisation and inequality. Similarly, Motzafi-Haller, quoted in Anyidoho (2006:164) writes “an experience of social and political exclusion is likely to shape more critical thinking about such experiences in the collective, structural domain”. In other words, a scholar’s lived experience is not only reflected in the ontological assumptions made about what is reality, but also what part of reality is worthy of being researched. To this end, it is assumed that knowledge is always relative to the questions raised for study.

Anyidoho’s focus on identity, particularly as influenced by positionality, also emphasises the way in which reality is perceived and interpreted by researchers. “Positionality refers to the identities of the researcher in relation to the ‘researched’. [It] indicates contextualized and relational locations such as nationality, ethnicity, race, class, education, religion, family affiliation, ideological leanings, epistemological perspectives and philosophical orientations (Anyidoho, 2006:158). It also refers to the importance of proximity to the reality, to the lived experience. In other words, the assumption is that the question of where you stand is important to the research produced.

Unfortunately, the current state of affairs is such that much of the research currently being done on Africa (that we are exposed to) is produced by non-African scholars, many with only “marginal exposure to African geo-cultural space” (Beckman and Adeoti, 2006:8). If one agrees with the arguments set out above, the discord between identity, location and knowledge have important implications for the ways in which the problems of Africa are understood and analysed, including the development of theory. Importantly, Anyidoho qualifies the value she attaches to location by saying that “Locations are, however, mobile because each person inhabits multiple locations within and across time”. It follows that “what you stand for should be as important as where you stand” (Anyidoho, 2006:163-164, emphasis in original). This would suggest that scholarship within the African context cannot be regarded as legitimate simply because it is of African origin. The above statements clearly reject the positivist notion that value-free theory is possible, in other words that it is possible to separate fact from value. That which is being observed is inextricably linked to the values held by and the perspective subscribed to by the observer.

Jorgensen (2000:11) explores the issue further, albeit in relation to continental European IR vs. British and American IR. He insists that not only is it different from British or American approaches, but that it also “adds value to the discipline”. He bases his argument on what he believes to be the influence of cultural-institutional context, which consists, according to him, of three dimensions:

- “the political culture of the countries or regions in which theorizing takes place;
- The organizational culture of science bureaucracies and university systems;
- The habits, attitudes and professional discourse within the social science”.
Unlike Tickner, Jorgensen thus focuses more on the context of the discipline itself rather than on extraneous factors. With regard to the influence of political culture, however, he notes how Scandinavian scholarship is known for its liberal approach and its focus on peace research, both clearly reflections of the Scandinavian political culture and worldview. If one considers the parallel development of the discipline of IR and that of the realist tradition in US foreign policy, it becomes clear that the factors identified by Jorgensen can have significant implications for the study of IR within different contexts.

In a similar vein to Bilgin’s argument, he notes that many commentators will admit that it is possible to identify such a thing as continental IR theory, they dismiss it as “either clones or a franchise enterprise” (2000:12). Using the great debates in IR to show how these have ignored the developments in continental IR and are therefore rather misleading as a reflection of the development of the field, he reaches the conclusion that “Continental IR is in several aspects very different from the Anglo-Saxon world. It is preoccupied with different debates, the configuration of theoretical positions is different, meaning that also the fault-lines or intersections between theoretical positions are different”.

It is important to note at this point the dangers inherent in emphasising Africa’s differences to the extent that the continent becomes essentialised. For if too much is made of Africa’s difference to the rest of the world, this could further entrench its marginalisation in both international relations and International Relations. That is not the intention here. While it must be recognised that many aspects of Africa’s international relations are different to that of the rest of the world, it is also important to note that there are many similarities. This is significant, as it allows us to draw lessons from Africa and apply them to the rest of the world. While some of the content of Africa’s international relations are thus similar to that of Europe, the USA, and particularly the rest of the developing world, it is perceived and made sense of differently.

**What stories can African contribute?**

Bleiker argues that those (American and British) IR stories which have come to dominate the field have become accepted as fact to the extent that they are no longer thought of as stories. The result has been that these dominant IR stories “have successfully transformed one specific interpretation of world politics into reality *per se* ... have gradually become accepted as common sense” (2001:38). Niemann (2001) argues along the same line by holding that the unquestioned acceptance of this ‘common sense’ fails to analyse the ways in which it is constructed and maintained. The objective is thus to challenge dominant western IR stories and reclaim the space for alternative – in this case African - stories.

The question arises how one goes about telling different stories. One answer would be to look beyond disciplinary boundaries to explore themes other than those prescribed by orthodox IR. Bleiker (2001) suggests that the most effective way of doing this is not simply through critique (of which there has been ample) but through forgetting, and through substituting the existing stories of IR with new, alternative ones. “Indeed, the
most powerful potential of critical scholarship may well lie in the attempt to tell different stories about IR, for once these stories have become validated, they may well open up spaces for more inclusive and less violence-prone practice of world politics” (Bleiker, 2001:38-39). This paper argues that these alternative stories do not necessarily have to be created from scratch, because they exist. They exist in African scholarship, which is where we need to look for new insights into understanding international relations. However, many of the stories from Africa which may enrich our understanding of IR may not, at first glance, be recognisable as IR.

This goes to the heart of the discipline of IR’s continued struggle to define itself. What exactly is it that IR can study – where do the disciplinary boundaries lie? And who decides these limits? In his ground-breaking article, Smith (2002) identifies two main areas of concern: the fact that what currently constitutes legitimate scholarship in IR is defined by the American mainstream view, and that this results in many global inequalities (pertaining to human rights and economic inequality) not falling into the boundaries of what has been set aside as IR. Tickner (2003b:346) too notes that the discipline of IR has “reaffirmed its legitimacy though the fixing of boundaries”, and adds that “Knowledge of global realities, however, often lies beyond such boundaries”.

This issue is also touched on by Bajpai (2005:30), who notes that “India does not have a record of political thinking that self-consciously and explicitly addresses the relations between states and between states and other ‘external’ entities. States being a European invention, how could Indians have produced materials pertaining to ‘International Studies’? However, he qualifies this by saying “if the problematic International Studies is presented differently, then one can read various strands of Indian thought as relevant to the building of the contemporary field of study”. This is, of course, just as pertinent to African thought. A related question which will not be delved into in detail here is what can be regarded as theory. If we apply a western understanding of theory, this would again be a limitation. It would be more useful to employ a looser notion of theory, along the lines of Gadamer’s view that theory is ‘seeing what is’. This would mean that if much of ‘what is’ international relations is occurring on the African continent, ways of seeing / recognising that would be regarded as potentially valuable contributions to theory.

In order to uncover potential African contributions to IR, we will therefore have to look beyond the disciplinary boundaries of IR, beyond the often aggressively guarded notion of what constitutes the field. This follows in the tradition of an increasing number of IR scholars who are drawing on political theory, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and other fields to enhance their understanding of IR. If we entertain the notion that disciplinary boundaries are largely constructed, this opens up a range of possibilities. As Kate Manzo (1999:493) shows in her review article, important topics in the social sciences are inevitably of interest across disciplinary boundaries. One of these, arguably one of the core concepts of IR, is power. Drawing on her reviews of Doty and Escobar, Manzo makes the point that “no one discipline has a monopoly on the study of power” (1999:494).
In addition, one should also be more inclusive with regard to the choice of sources: this paper also proposes to look beyond academic scholarship to the pronouncements and insights of political leaders and others whose thoughts have been documented. For example, the best known forms of African political thought (Negritude, African Socialism, and revolutionary theory) were the philosophies of the famous founding fathers of the new African nations, such as Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure, Julius Nyere, Leopold Senghor and Kenneth Kaunda. In addition, some of the most powerful political statements have been made by African writers such as Soyinka, Ngugi, Achebe. Without elaborating too much on the development of African political thought, it should be noted here that, as was and is the case with the development of political thought elsewhere in the world, African political thought was and continues to be a reflection of events occurring on the continent. Relatedly, we must also recognise that much of African political thought is the result of conscious political strategy. Although African political thought is often characterised as being largely Marxist / structuralist in orientation, we should not lose sight of the fact that it is equally possible to identify strands of realism (e.g., as practised by a number of military leaders) and idealism (e.g., Kaunda’s humanism)\(^4\). Finally, new forms of media open up endlessly new opportunities for telling stories\(^5\) – popular culture has always been a vehicle for political statements, and has found new avenues (such as the Internet) of expression.

Brief mention should be made here of the challenges of interdisciplinarity. Clearly drawing on a range of potential sources that straddle accepted boundaries of knowledge is accompanied by a plethora of methodological and other obstacles. The pros and cons of working in an interdisciplinary manner are well known and have been debated countless times, both within the context of IR but also at a more metatheoretical level. Suffice it to say that, in choosing to go the interdisciplinary route, one should be acutely aware of the potential stumbling blocks, which are however not insurmountable if approached in a sensitive manner.

A comprehensive review of possible African contributions thus requires some creative thinking and is clearly a huge undertaking. This paper therefore presents but the preliminary results of an initial delving into the subject, in the hope that it will elicit ideas for other potential sources of African contributions.

In summary, thus, what is meant by African contributions? The concept has purposely been left wide open to include, amongst others:

- insights or contributions by African scholars (working both within Africa and beyond)
- insights or contributions by non-African scholars working on Africa;
- insights gleaned from a close interpretation of African experiences.

The latter represents the crucial consideration, namely that the contributions should be informed / enriched by the African experience. In other words, it is the African

\(^4\) Christopher La Monica (2008) tries to integrate African political thought into existing western categories, in an attempt to illustrate that Africa is in fact not marked purely by difference.

\(^5\) Thank you to Tim Shaw for pointing this out.
experience, the African context, which has lead the scholar to revise / innovate on / contribute to existing IR theory. So, ultimately, by contribution I mean insights arising from reflection on the African experience that can add to our understanding of International Relations.

In considering the different African ‘stories’, we need to remain aware that, similar to stories from other parts of the world, African stories are tainted by class, gender and other biases. Stories are always a reflection of power relations: who is more vocal, whose voice is more audible, etc6. While certain voices may be marginalised within the African context, African stories in general are marginalised in the global context: we are thus dealing with layers of marginalisation.

With regard to ways in which different types of stories can come out of Africa, I propose the following:

1) Reinterpreting old stories
2) Telling stories in a different language
3) Telling stories with new main characters
4) Telling stories about existing characters but with a new plot

Each of these will briefly be outlined below.

**Reinterpreting Old Stories**

Unlike critics such as Puchala (1997) who explicitly state that their focus is on “radical” non-Western thinking, this paper also regards those ‘moderate’ views, which may be classified more in terms of their reinterpretation of western thought rather than being radical departures from existing theory, as important contributions to the development of the field.

Bilgin speaks of a mimicry of western theory which, she admits, involves “doing world politics in a manner that is ‘almost the same but not quite’”, in other words, “doing world politics in a seemingly ‘similar’ yet unexpectedly ‘different’ way” (2008:6). Her point that “‘non-Western’ resistance and/or ‘difference’ may take many forms – including a search for ‘similarity’ “ (2008:14) is a valid one, and this underlines the point this paper tries to make –namely that similarity (in the form of adaptation to the local context, or re-interpretation) is but one form, while difference and innovation may be another. All of these potential contributions from the non-Western world are worth inquiring into, and revision/adaptation of existing theory should not be excluded.

Acharya and Stubbs (2006:128) note how scholars of Southeast Asian IR have adapted IR theories to make them more appropriate for understanding the particularities of the region. Significantly, they note that these ‘modifications’ may not only be limited to engendering greater understanding of that particular region, but may also contribute to studying other parts of the world, with considerable potential to advance IR theorising.

6 Thank you to Scarlett Cornelissen for pointing this out.
By using the case study of the ASEAN member states’ efforts in establishing regional cooperation and institutions, scholars of Southeast Asia are able to make an important contribution to the way in which power is understood, particularly in constructivist thinking.

Tickner explains how the adaptation of existing IR theories has occurred in Latin America, where, “Although dominant U.S. discourses are present in regional analyses of international problems, they have been appropriated and molded to the Latin American context, suggesting that the flow of knowledge from the United States has been adjusted to fit conditions in the region (2003b:326). She notes how the literature on autonomy produced in Latin America during the 1980s, for example, succeeded in establishing a “conceptual bridge” between dependency theory and mainstream IR theory. Important lessons could be learned regarding attempts at bridge-building and theoretical dialogue in general. Similarly, the work of scholars like Helio Jaguaribe, Juan Carlos Puig and Carlos Escudé, who have been instrumental in adapting traditional IR theories to the regional analysis in order to come up with contributions such as “regional autonomy” and “peripheral realism”. Mohammed Ayoob’s subaltern realism is another case in point where realism has been adapted to take into account the experiences of the developing world.

**Telling stories in a different language**

Another way in which existing IR stories can be retold is through adapting the language, in other words the concepts used. Much has been said about the inappropriateness of existing IR concepts to Africa, and the subsequent limited understanding of IR phenomena provided by mainstream theory. Given that the generally accepted definitions of several IR concepts do not fit the African condition, a solution may be an African rereading or reconstruction of these concepts.

Bleiker suggests that recognising and addressing the fact that all concepts have a political dimension is the first step towards creating space for new stories. The next is to “subvert the delineation of thinking space imposed by orthodox definitions of IR concepts” by either reassessing and reinterpreting the meaning of existing concepts or by engaging in a completely novel way of conceptualising (Bleiker, 2001:50-51).

One concept which is regarded as one of the greatest challenges currently facing the globe and the developing world in particular is conflict. Given how widespread conflict is on the African continent, and adhering to the arguments put forward earlier regarding the significance of lived experiences and positionality, insights from Africa would seem to be an obvious source of knowledge on the nature of conflict. This point is emphasised by Tickner (2003a:311), who writes that “Locally grounded knowledge is crucial for understanding conflict. Without local inputs, the explanatory power of comparative labels that are fundamental to theory-building endeavours…is extremely limited…” While she admits that she is not implying that “only ‘autochthonous’ points of view qualify as legitimate interpreters of conflict in the third world”, she does make the

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7 See in particular Dunn and Shaw (2001) and Neumann (1998).
important point that local (African) perspectives offer crucial insights that conventional IR frameworks may cause us to simply overlook” (Tickner, 2003a:312).

Arguably the most contested IR concept in scholarship on Africa is the state. Criticism about the inappropriateness of a western understanding of the state to Africa abound. Lemke (2003), for example, argues that the main difference between Africa and the rest of the world is that in Africa states are states in name only. He suggests that IR scholars move beyond the idea of the state as an inherently fixed concept and allow it to be ‘opened up’. Mustapha also emphasises the importance of taking account of Africa’s own experience with regard to state formation in theorising about the current political and other challenges faced by the continent and its people. As it stands, “Eurocentric models are implicitly or explicitly deployed without any effort being made at establishing and evaluating the relevance of any African experience on the matter” (2002:2).

Liberalism is another concept the meaning of which often remains unproblematised in western IR scholarship. In contrast, Nkiwane (2001b:282) notes how the position held by western (liberal) IR theorists that the promotion of democracy and foreign economic and political penetration can go hand in hand is problematised by African scholars. He further notes how both African scholarship and African examples “lend important insights and critiques to the liberal perspective in IR” (2001a). Africa can, for example, offer a powerful understanding of the functioning of states and markets, as well as the potential for state and market failure.

According to Boele van Hensbroek, Western liberal thought could be enriched with African values and institutional forms that lead to a substantial involvement of the general population in public deliberation, in other words infusing it with African traditions. Generally, Western multiparty democracy tends to be regarded by neotraditionalist African thinkers (like Anyanwu, Ntumba, Okolo, Momoh and Ramose, Gyekeye, Wiredu) as consisting of adversarial politics and a power struggle. In contrast, African democracy, with its focus on communalism, involves broad-based deliberation aimed at consensus and reconciling all views. It is an extreme form of participatory democracy. Nyerere’s ujamaa, which conceptualises the African nation as an extended family engaged in cooperative activities and direct participatory decision-making, which ultimately forms the basis for a non-capitalist path to development, is based on this idea of democracy.

Furthermore, “The African critique, directly and indirectly, of liberalism in IR enhances our breadth and depth of theoretical and operational understanding, and offers an important contribution to our interpretation of how nation-states relate” (Nkiwane, 2001a:106). He uses the example of the African debate on the substance and meaning of democracy, framed in the context of liberal versus popular / radical democracy to illustrate how African insights can be important in advancing our understanding of such basic concepts as IR, and how it can turn accepted theories, such as the democratic peace theory, on its head. So rather than accept the commonly held notion in especially neorealist and liberalist scholarship that African examples are aberrations and serve only
a nuisance value, we should look more closely at these examples and see what we might learn from them that could potentially inform our broader understanding of IR.

**Telling stories with new main characters**

Another important lesson to be learned from the African experience concerns the range of actors that need to be taken into account in developing a comprehensive understanding of international relations. The potential contribution to deepening our understanding of IR is enormous, if we agree with Swatuk and Vale (2001:9) that the most important point about mainstream IR’s focus on the state is that this results in scholars asking the wrong questions. By turning our focus to alternative units of analysis, we may thus be on the right track to asking the right questions!

Malaquias suggests that African reformulations of IR theory should involve “confronting the hegemonic position of the state-centric approach and replacing it with more inclusive conceptualizations”. Specifically, this involves reassessing the choice of units of analysis, and the context within which actions take place (2001:15). He believes that looking at alternative non-state and particularly sub-state actors, such as nations, may provide us with new tools with which to explain the behaviour of African states and – one should add – other states as well. In terms of the relevance of recognising the power of these non-state actors not only to understanding Africa but to the study of IR more generally, Malaquias argues that “the emergence of powerful non-state actors with political, military and administrative capacity to control a significant geographical area and population within an internationally recognized state … provides a unique opportunity to study important agents of state dissolution and state formation” (2001:11).

Shifting the focus to scholars in the developing world, Puchala points out that “non-western theorists do not organize their world-views in terms of familiar Western categories” (1997:130). While states, which continue to be the main unit of analysis in western IR thinking, do not hold a similarly dominant position in non-western thinking, non-state actors like movements, nations, cultures, warlords, etcetera become more important. Relatedly, Swatuk and Vale (2001:12) agree that “state-centred discourses tend to stand at odds with the lived experiences of people, resources, animals, diseases, etcetera on the ground”, reinforcing the point made earlier about the significance of insights generated through lived experiences.

An issue related to the choice of units of analysis is the distinction made between domestic and international factors which is made by mainstream IR. Many critical scholars, especially those in the feminist camp, have pointed out the ludicrousness of such an arbitrary dividing line between factors (including actors) which may be taken into account by IR scholars, and those which should rather be left out of the equation. Their argument is particularly relevant to Africa. When considering so-called intra-state conflicts in Africa, for example, one must take into account the fact that many of these conflicts often are rooted in external factors, and that they often have considerable external dimensions, not least in terms of spillover into neighbouring states (MacLean, 2001:149).
A vital point to make, especially in light of fears of essentialising Africa, is of course that the importance of considering the role of domestic factors in our attempt to understand issues at the international level is clearly not only relevant to Africa. MacLean emphasises how the obscuring of ‘inside’ versus ‘outside’ dimensions of international politics is hardly unique to the African experience, as “the new complexity is a worldwide phenomenon”. Given the preponderance of this fluidity between national and international politics in Africa, however, it would seem that the continent “provides rich analytical content for understanding the transformations in the world order now occurring” (2001:150). In other words, one could say that Africa serves almost as a magnifying glass to highlight issues which are also relevant elsewhere.

**Telling stories about existing characters but with a new plot**

Another potential source of a new IR story is unpacking how African states’ behaviour differs from that normally ascribed to the state, and to determine whether what are regarded as ‘aberrations’ are important for generating a greater understanding of IR not only in Africa but also in other parts of the world.

The idea of a “diplomacy of solidarity” offers a case in point. Commentators of international politics have been puzzled about the seemingly irrational tendency of African states to ‘stick together’, despite potential international sanctions to national interest that could result from this. One needs only to think African leaders’ unwillingness to publicly criticise Robert Mugabe’s human rights abuses. Tom Tieku’s chapter in this book elaborates on this notion of a solidarity norm which he argues is based on Africa’s embedded understanding of the person. He contends that it is necessary to reconceptualise the state in a societal way, and that this will not only be relevant to understanding Africa, but also the tendency towards group formations such as the G77 in the rest of the developing world.

In a related argument, Mahmud (2001) uses the African cases of Nigeria and Libya to question the accepted notion in traditional IR theory that the most powerful states in the international system should be able to influence the behaviour of weaker states using the instrument of sanctions. He argues that the failure of sanctions to successfully change the behaviour of Libya and Nigeria can be found in factors not generally considered in mainstream IR theory, namely: “ideologies, the nature of inter-state / cultural interactions, and a type of diplomacy of solidarity” (2001:130).

Another way in which the behaviour and interests of African states appear to differ from the ‘common sense’ stories we have come to know about how states operate is African leaders’ apparent prioritising of regime survival. This runs counter to the generally accepted foundation of traditional IR theory, namely survival of the state and national interest. According to Clark (2001:91-92), “The concept of national interest fails patently in Africa, for at least two reasons. First, as we all know, there are no real national states in Africa; rather, the continent’s states, largely defined territorially in Europe, contain some variety of different ethnic peoples (or clans) who do not conceive of themselves as
a nation. As a result, the leaders of African states are as likely to be pursuing sub-national (ethnic) interests as they are the state-wide interests of their populations” (emphasis in original). One could argue that it is often the perceptions by one part or parts of the population that their interests are being overlooked at the expense of another group’s interests which leads to much of the violent conflict we have seen in Africa.

In trying to understand why African state leaders sometimes intervene and sometimes don’t intervene in one another’s affairs, and why the leaders of African states have consistently sought sponsorship from powerful states and other actors (such as IFIs) in the international system, Clark comes to the conclusion that the concept of regime security appears to be particularly useful in understanding this behaviour (2001:94). The argument is thus that the behaviour of African states, or the leaders in particular, can better be understood in the context of regime survival rather than the widely accepted (in IR theory, in any case) notion of state survival. It would thus seem that much of the international relations of African states can be understood in terms of regime security or, put differently, maintaining political power.

We also see that, in terms of state behaviour, personal and regional diplomacy plays a significant role. As Mahmud (2001:138) notes, “the African approach emphasizes mutual respect and cultural reciprocity”. The conclusion that can be drawn appears to be that African IR is a much more personalised matter, a lesson which may also apply elsewhere. Given the USA’s recent foreign policy, many commentators have speculated on whether action was taken on the basis of the USA’s national interest, or whether the personal convictions of influential people within the administration outweighed such “traditional” considerations.

These examples show how African states do not always behave in the rational, predictable way assumed by mainstream IR theories, and how mainstream as well as Marxist-inspired theories (the latter often being thought to be of greater relevance to Africa) underplay the agency of weaker states. However, the implication is not that African states are the only ones who behave in ways that mainstream IR theories cannot explain. The point can be made again that African contributions may also be able to provide us with insights into the seemingly irrational behaviour of western states. The example of the Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq, and the rigorous critique of the war by leading realist John Mearsheimer comes to mind.

Another area in which African international relations has differed from international relations elsewhere has been regional integration. While studies on regionalism have flourished over the past decades, much of the work has looked to Europe and its successful integration efforts for lessons to be learned. In trying to understand regionalisation in the periphery, scholars also depended on European analysis. Niemann laments the fact that “Few efforts were undertaken to unravel the overlapping puzzles made up of the multiple layers of ethnicity, statehood and proto-nationalism which constitute current peripheral and semi-peripheral states” (2001:62). He continues that integration efforts were regarded as tools for development by both western and
dependencia theorists. Their success was thus gauged based on attaining those goals. If one takes into consideration the above discussion about the different ways in which African states behave in the international arena, one could presuppose that different lessons might be learned in exploring African attempts at regional integration.

Here, Iheduru’s 2007 paper on lessons from West Africa proves instructive. He explores so-called “transnational mixed actor coalitions” in highlighting the ever-expanding role that non-state actors and civil society are playing, especially with regard to establishing new patterns of regional interaction, creating shared norms, and impacting on a variety of regional governance issues. He holds that these African trends hold important lessons for our understanding of international relations. Focusing on the issue areas of democracy and human rights, regional economic integration as an identity-creating process, and Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) between West African countries and the European Union, he tries to show the “significance of networks and mixed-actor coalitions for generating more inclusive theories of international relations” (Iheduru, 2007:6). He further maintains that “the significance of these mixed-actor coalitions lies in the fact that they not only are developing novel strategies to influence policy outcomes; they are also laying the groundwork for transforming the terms and nature of the debate” (2007:7).

He argues that West Africa “has become a laboratory for both the practice and analysis of the role of...networks and mixed-actor coalitions in international and regional politics” (Iheduru, 2007:7). Some of the innovative developments that can be seen in the region include the tendency of regional activist groups to form alliances with both inter-governmental organisations and governments (2007:8). Another trend is the rise of sub-regional coalitions of organised private sector groups such as the West African Enterprise Network (WAEN), which are increasingly influencing regional decision-making processes, setting norms for regional practice and engendering new forms of regional cultural identity (Iheduru, 2007:15-19). These coalitions and networks appear to be “creating a wide range of complex regional governance norms with serious implications for state-society relations, rarely captured or explained by “standard” international relations research” (Iheduru, 2007:26).

Given the world-wide trend that bottom-up economic, social and cultural interactions are developing more quickly than the formal political cooperation, other countries may the West African example may be able to give IR scholars some insights into understanding this process. In this area, Africa seems to be setting the trend, with ECOWAS being the first regional organisation to create a formal mixed-actors coalition of states and civil society groups (Iheduru, 2007:23). It would thus seem that there are many lessons from Africa in relation to novel forms of regional cooperation that can be taken on board by scholars interested in the phenomenon of regionalism.

**Sharing stories**

While this paper aims to consider the way in which African insights can contribute to IR theory in general, by implication it has mostly referred to ways in which western IR can
be enriched. An important related issue which needs to be touched on, however, is that of south-south cross-pollination. Chakrabarty (1994), quoted in Zegeye and Vambe (2006:343) make an interesting point when he notes that “one of the symptoms of the subordinate status of African intellectuals in relation to European scholars is that they run to European sources to validate their experiences the way ducks run to water”. On the other hand, “European scholars do not feel compelled to use sources of African knowledge when they write about Africa” (2006:343).

On a similar note, referring in particular to Indian scholars, Mallavarapu (2005:4) expresses his concern in the lack of mutual acknowledgement, evident in lack of references to one another’s work. This can be applied more broadly. Scholars from the developing world tend to cite scholars from the developed world. This results in the situation where African scholars are using frameworks developed by American or European scholars to understand phenomena within their own country or region. He also warns of the dangers of parochialism, however, warning scholars from the developing world not to limit themselves to “participat[ing] from the limited perspective of one’s national location and obscure similar predicaments elsewhere” (Mallavarapu, 2005:9).

On the other hand, Mazrui (1980:125) points out that there have been important Indian contributions to African political thought: notably Gandhi’s doctrine of non-violence, and Nehru’s doctrine of non-alignment. It is therefore vital that scholars from the developing world increasingly look towards each other to enhance their understandings of IR. Especially with regard to understanding the way in which international relations is played out in a regional context, there are such obvious similarities between Africa, Latin America, and Asia that the lack of cross-pollination seems almost absurd.

**Stories about the meaning of it all**

In 1989 David Hirschman, speaking at a workshop on IR in South Africa, highlighted the problem inherent in the study of IR, namely that “to the extent that it attempts to deal with nations-states, it is focusing on entities that are so different in nature that the lowest common denominator – formal sovereignty – is so legalistic that it ceases to have substance” (Hirschman, 1989:51). He admits that the field also concerns itself with other actors and non-state processes, but maintains that

“in relationship to the Third World, one has a sense of a discipline looking for a coin in a floodlit street in a country where 90% of the people have no electricity. The very great possibility of this field of study seeming to be irrelevant to the poorest people of this world appears to be inherent. Even when it goes beyond relations between states…it remains a discipline which is distant in the extreme from the concerns of the vast majority of the Third World, and, therefore, from some of the most fundamental problems facing the world community…A field of study that is so concerned with the behaviour of those who have power has precious little to say about the powerless…International relations, then, beyond appearing irrelevant, also looks like an unconcerned discipline” (Hirschman, 1989:53).
Hirschman (1989:56) alludes to the fact that the complexity of the third world situation may threaten the discipline. He claims that IR is not participating in the debates surrounding development, neo-colonialism, nature of the state, etc, that other disciplines such as sociology, history, developing studies, and even political science have engaged in at least since the 1960s. This generates questions about the role of scholars who study Africa, including whether it is real understanding that is being sought, or simply proof that IR theories are universally applicable? In other words, are IR theorists shaping reality – including the African reality – to ‘fit’ existing theories, refusing to admit that it cannot be done? Almost twenty years later, his concerns and questions are just as pertinent as they were in 1989, before the end of the Cold War. Since then, a number of scholars have expressed similar concerns about the apparent gulf between the discipline of IR and the very real problems facing the majority of the world’s people.

So perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from Africa is less to do with the content of IR than with the very underlying *raison d’etre* of the field. The lesson goes beyond ontology, epistemology, and conceptualisation. It is of a more existential nature: The African situation seems to be begging the question of all scholars engaged in trying to understand the world: why? What is the purpose of it all? Why have we dedicated our intellectual energy to this field of study? The African answer may be: to improve the situation of the majority of the world’s people – in other words, it suggests a much more normative rationale for the existence of the field than that advanced in most IR textbooks. This is not to imply that African stories are in themselves morally superior. After all, the stories of Robert Mugabe’s destruction of Zimbabwe and the seemingly unending conflicts in parts of the continent are part of Africa’s contribution as well. It is however precisely the *problems* facing Africa – the poverty, the conflict, the disease – that tell very powerful stories which IR scholars should pay attention to.

Of course these questions are not new, and have been asked by, amongst others, critical IR scholars. However, as Murphy laments in his recent article, critical IR scholars, too, have failed in their quest to make IR more relevant. “The critical turn in IR promised …an empathetic understanding of those we study…The promise of which has not been fulfilled because the research strategies of critical theorists have rarely given them direct access to the understandings of those outside the privileged core of world society” (Murphy, 2007:117). Murphy praises the progress made by development and feminist scholars, and laments the failures of IR scholars to engage in scholarship which, in the words of Nick Wheeler, quoted in Vale (2001:29) “places human suffering at the centre of its theoretical project”.

Murphy, however also points out the obstacles, noting that “given the vastness of the inequalities that exist at a global level, the social worlds of critical IR scholars and those we wish to serve are so disconnected...there is no social group of the world’s least advantaged with which we have any particularly close connection; it is very unlikely that we understand much at all about their life-worlds, self-understanding of struggles” (2007:131-132). This is where the earlier point made about the importance of positionality and location becomes relevant. There are scholars in Africa whose lived

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8 Thank you to Scarlett Cornelissen for making this point.
experiences correspond much more closely with those least advantaged and vulnerable. Their insights can be of immeasurable value in advancing the field of IR.

In conclusion, therefore, exploring contributions from the lived experience of Africa is crucial for, to quote Clapham, “a view of international politics from the bottom up may … help, not only to illuminate the impact of the global system on those who are least able to resist, but to provide a perspective on that system, and hence on the study of international relations as a whole, which may complement and even correct the perspective gained by looking from the top downwards” (Clapham, 1996:4).

The position set out in this chapter is thus a self-consciously normative one: that Africa has important contributions to make which IR scholars should take into account in order to enhance their understanding of international relations. Of course, not all IR scholars are interested in or open to hearing stories from the marginalised outskirts of the field. As noted above, there are also other challenges – not least of which are linguistic and metatheoretical – to integrating African stories into IR. While stories may be told, we are still confronted with the question of whether anybody will be listening.

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