

# FROM MULTICULTURALITY TO INTERCULTURALITY?

## LOCATING THE ONGOING AFRICAN AGENCY DISCOURSE IN THE DEBATE

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### **Abstract**

*This essay argues and concludes that an interdependence of people and their cultures will better facilitate a move from multiculturalism to interculturalism in (South) Africa. The first part of the essay attempts a theological description of the concepts of multiculturalism and interculturalism. The second part discusses how interculturalism can be distinguished from multiculturalism. The last part proposes how the move from multiculturalism to interculturalism could be facilitated.*

**Key Words:** Multiculturalism, Interculturalism, African Agency Discourse, Ubuntu

### **Introduction**

The primary aim of this essay is, firstly to determine *how* interculturalism can be distinguished from multiculturalism. Secondly, *how* the move from multiculturalism to interculturalism can be facilitated. But for the sake of clarity it is important to first attempt an answer to the question: What is interculturalism? From that answer, one can proceed to answer the “how” questions. However, in order to discern how interculturalism can be distinguished from multiculturalism, it is also imperative to also answer the question: What is multiculturalism? Colleagues in Sociology and Social Anthropology by the nature of their training and research can best make the distinction between interculturalism and multiculturalism and how a move from multiculturalism to interculturalism could be facilitated. Therefore, this essay only attempts a theological description of the concepts of multiculturalism and interculturalism (1). It describes how in a (Systematic) theological perspective, interculturalism can be distinguished from multiculturalism (2). The last section proposes some of the ways by which the move from multiculturalism to interculturalism could be facilitated (3).

### **Multiculturalism and Interculturalism**

Multiculturalism suggests that there are set of values, belief systems, ways of life or ideologies competing, in ethical perspective, for what Tony Balcomb at the University of KwaZulu Natal refers to as “high moral ground” (2003:15), and in theological perspective, producing different and contending theologies. This inevitably produces what the American Davison James Hunter calls “culture wars” (1991), which Balcomb describes as “*different groups expressing different sets of values that find their legitimating moral base in different meta-narratives*” (2003:15). With this description of multiculturalism, we can describe the apartheid South African society as a multicultural society. In the apartheid South Africa, there was, on the one hand, a culture of “separation and division, of ethnicity and class, of privilege and oppression” mainly for the purpose of establishing social and economic

hegemony for the Afrikaner nationalists and their people (Smit 1992:106). On the other hand, there was a culture of resistance, of struggle for liberation and subsequent social transformation for all South Africans being agitated for, at that time, by the blacks.

These cultures were competing with each other for the “souls”, people and the South African land mass, each producing its own ethics and theology. As a matter of fact, each culture had a different view of God, the mission of the church on earth, and the responsibility of the citizens to the state. Hence, the *Kairos Document* (1986) identified three (3) theologies in the then apartheid South Africa namely, “State theology”, “Church theology” and “Prophetic theology”. State theology apparently affirmed that the will of God was being fulfilled in the apartheid system therefore the state was right in enforcing apartheid policies. Church theology opposed apartheid but nevertheless maintained that the God of *law and order* forbids violence for whatever reasons and the state laws should be obeyed, or at least repealed through non-violent means. State theology and Church theology directly or indirectly supported the “culture” of the white Afrikaners. Prophetic theology declared apartheid as sin (evil) and maintained that the theological justification of apartheid by State theology was heresy (Tutu 1983).

It is therefore clear from the above description of the various theologies in the then apartheid South Africa that, in one set of “cultures”, apartheid was right, and its theological justification a correct teaching of the Bible. In the other set of cultures, apartheid was morally evil (sin), and its theological justification heresy. Balcomb is right in this sense for asserting that in multiculturalism there is inevitably a “*multiplicity of stories from various segments of the society*” competing for the “moral high ground” (2003:15). Because, as Balcomb maintains, the different groups are expressing different sets of values based on their own beliefs, understanding of the society within which they live, and on various “myths” that support their convictions and believes there is no common ground, no interaction and no dialogue (2003:15).

Interculturalism also implies a plurality of cultures. However, there is a high level of interaction between the cultures. There is communication, willingness to embrace and listen to one another. There is dialogue between the cultures. The set of values are still different, just as they are different in multicultural environments. But instead of resentment arising from the “myths” (Balcomb 2003:16-17; West 2004:132) that legitimate the various actions and worldviews, there is an interface between the various set of cultures and therefore values and theologies arising from the cultures.

An example of interculturalism is clearly seen in postmodernity where it is claimed that there is a consensus that there are no epistemologically privileged texts, their contexts and their interpreters; no privilege race, no privileged theology and no privilege set of values (see Tracy 1987; Jonker 2000; West 1991, 1992a 1992b, 1999a, 1999b, 2002, 2004; Punt 1999a, 1999b). This creates an enabling environment for intercultural theology, hermeneutic, instruction, dialogue and education to take place. At this point it should be clear (at least vaguely) to the reader how interculturalism is distinguishable from multiculturalism.

### **How can Interculturalism be Distinguished from Multiculturalism?**

Any “how” questions require a description of a process through which a means can be devised for solving an existing problem. It is a methodological question, demanding a method of dealing with a situation or programme of action, capable of providing solutions in the long run to an existing problem. This means that an existing problem needs to be first identified. In this case, we need to first find out if there is such a thing as multiculturalism and interculturalism as two variables. In the context of apartheid and post-apartheid South

Africa, the former will be a presumed feature of apartheid and the later of post-apartheid South Africa. Posed as a question: Has there been a move from multiculturalism to interculturalism in the post-apartheid South Africa? In order to answer this question, it is important to locate it within the ongoing African agency discourse.

African agency discourse suggests that “human beings, even the most oppressed, marginalized and seemingly destitute among them, have the potential, possibility and even to act as (moral) agents of transformation and change in their own lives and in the lives of others” (Maluleke & Nadar 2004:7-8). The South African Old Testament scholar, Madi-poane Masenya, questions the reality of African agency in contemporary South African Old Testament scholarship. In attempt to answer the question: Is white South African Old Testament scholarship African? Masenya describes as “disturbing” the pains that scholars have to take to define who an African is, whereas it was crystal clear during the apartheid era who an African was, a designation cherished then by no one including the black Africans because of its derogatory import (Masenya 2002:3-4). The female biblical scholar finds it “confusing” that in an attempt by Africans to rediscover what they “lost or were made to lose, those who had the privilege to define us negatively, would now want to pose as though they were one with us and/or have been with us all along” (2002:4). Such a move, Masenya argues, “will not advance our attempt at self-discovery, self-affirmation as an African people in any way” (2002:4). Her suspicion is that the claim to be “African” in the white South African biblical scholarship is opportunistic, and therefore, capable of perpetrating the same act of marginalisation and oppression of Africans, this time intellectually – a viewpoint also clearly expressed by Maluleke and Nadar (2004b:5-17). She challenges the white South Africans “who ‘correctly’ want to claim to be ‘African’ all of a sudden because they argue that they were born and bred on the African continent” to answer the question: “When did these white South Africans become aware that they were born in Africa?” (2002:4). Furthermore, “if they are Africans, how *serious* do they take the African context(s) in their scholarship? For those white Old Testament scholars who are, all of a sudden, attempting to take the African contexts into account in their scholarship, we ask: What is prompting them to do it in present day South Africa?” In a related question she asks: “Is it because of the national pressure to transform? Are they now aware that it is tragic to do Western theology/Old Testament studies in an African context without taking the needs of African people in different African contexts seriously?” (2002:4).

The sincerity of white South African scholars in “correctly” owning Africa and her contexts is further questioned by Masenya on the ground that what they offer to their black South African students is “ivory tower” Western theology, “detached from the real life situations of people on the ground” (2002:5). In addition, she asserts that South African white scholars are more comfortable with European and Euro-American scholars than their African colleagues. Her example is the frequency with which they invite mainly European scholars as “visiting professors at universities that are in an African context: South African universities” (Masenya 2002:5).

With the above stated situation, Masenya does not think that white South African scholarship (including Old Testament) is African. Therefore, it cannot and it is not intended to be *agentive* African intellectual discourse.

In a swift response to Masenya, Gerrie Snyman (University of South Africa), a white South African Old Testament scholar, begins with an assertion that a “Euro-African” academic has a difficulty in “navigating the world of African academia” (2002:8). According to him, the Euro-African is “caught up in the conflict between the West as former imperial power and Africa as the former oppressed subordinates” (2002:8). In this

way, the “Euro-African is part of both worlds: Intellectually completely Euro-centric (being trained in the thoughts of great Western thinkers), yet, by birth, geographically part of the African continent” (2002:8). Snyman thinks that in this conflict, “Western intellectual frameworks are scrutinised and criticized, and sometimes even downright accused for all the ills and woes of African countries” (2002:8).

With the above-described dilemma as his point of departure, Snyman attempts to locate his own responsibility as a Euro-African in the present day South Africa. He says:

I am not sure how much responsibility I have to bear in the current cultural and political confrontation, but I guess given the decision my ancestors made, I am sided, sometimes willingly, sometimes involuntarily, with the colonials, although I have no physical ties with the Netherlands or France. Yet this is how the people from the West see me: A colonial residue in Africa” (2002:9). Snyman then tries to exonerate himself of the claim that he is a colonist: “Colonists have homes in far-away countries. I have none. Europe of Great Britain never was my home. South Africa is. I have never seen myself as a colonist. Nor do I see myself as those who became rich through the labour of others (2002:9).

Regarding the privileges that Masenya allege whites had during the apartheid, Snyman argues thus: “For my brothers and me, attending university was a privilege, not because I am white, but because my mother could never attend it. Frankly, I never felt imperialistic or colonial. What my parents achieved was achieved through their own hard and honourable labour” (2002:9). Therefore, Snyman comes to this conclusion: “It is difficult for me to see myself as the postcolonial ‘other’ against which the current discourse is aimed, except, of course, on political level where general support for the National Party in the past translates into collective guilt for the systematic oppression through apartheid” (2002:9).

With Masenya and Snyman’s arguments in mind, let us take two other views. One from an English white South African biblical scholar, Gerald O West and Desmond Tutu, an upper class black male (Archbishop emeritus, Cape Town). West is well-known, at least in (South) Africa, for his work with the poor and the marginalised communities in the Pietermaritzburg area in KwaZulu Natal. He has published widely on this topic and some of his works were cited earlier in this essay. His conviction is that for effective transformation (move from multiculturalism to interculturalism?) to take place in the post-apartheid South Africa, his whites comrades must undergo a process of “conversion” (1999a:16-17). West experienced his “conversion” at Sheffield in the mid 1980s. He describes the process that led to his “conversion as follows:

My own process of conversion is rooted in my white, middle-class, male and Christian identity and the South African context. White, middle-class males are groomed for greatness, particularly in the apartheid past of South Africa. We grew up expecting to be major players in the scheme of things. And even if we partially betray our race, class and gender by struggling against apartheid and its legacy we still expect to play a pivotal role in the struggle. It was only when I briefly left South Africa in the mid-1980s to study in Sheffield, just as a State of Emergency had been declared, and spent time with black exiles, that my perspective and expectations were changed. Black South African exiles made two things abundantly clear to me. They made it clear that they were in no doubt that I should return to South Africa, because that is where I belonged; they could not, in fact understand that there might be any other option... They also made it clear what my role on my return ought to be ...the resources and skills that I had obtained through my position of privilege, and at the cost of their oppression, should be made available to the struggle. I had a role, but the role was to wait for the call to serve, and then to serve (1999a:17).

Since 1991 West has been playing that role. Having experienced “conversion”, West is now partially constituted by his work with the black poor and marginalised communities “with” whom he “reads” the Bible (1999a:17). He has come to the conclusion that “work with poor and marginalized communities enables white, middle-class, male biblical scholars” like him to be partially “constituted by the experiences, needs, questions and resources of such communities” (1999a:17, 2001:167). However, this does not mean that West’s culture has changed. It is not that West ceases to be white. As a matter of fact, he is still very conscious of the fact that he is white and male, despite visible signs of “conversion” in his works and family life (for a critique of his claim and works, see Maluleke 2000:36, Maluleke & Nadar 2004b; cf. Akper 2005:1-13). But one thing is sure: He is committed to his work with the poor and the margins. West still maintains that even in the post-apartheid South Africa, “subjugated and incipient readings of the Bible and their related theologies have been resources for many, particularly for the poor and marginalized, and their struggle for survival, liberation and life is not yet over” (1999a:xiii). It is in this sense that West still thinks that he still has a responsibility to the poor and the marginalized in (South) Africa, just as the blacks exiled to the UK had told him almost two decades ago. Therefore, in a recent article he argues for the articulation, owning and mainstreaming of local theologies and the contribution that contextual Bible study could make in the process (2005:23-35).

Tutu on his part draws on his theology of *Ubuntu* and argues that the “dreams of God” for us cannot be fulfilled without collective responsibility to one another. For this to happen Tutu insists that all in (South) Africa and the entire world must be willing to undergo a process of what West describes as “conversion”. This time, a “conversion” from a culture of individualism and selective love for a segment of a society to a complete and unconditional love for all. Therefore, he calls for the adoption of a “family” metaphor as a path towards building a culture of communal life. Tutu explains the reason for his choice of family metaphor as follows:

The wonderful thing about family is that we are not expected to agree about everything under the sun. Show me a man and wife who have never disagreed and I will show you some accomplished fibbers. But those disagreements, pray God, do not usually destroy the unity of the family. And so it should be with God’s family. We are not expected at all times to be unanimous or to have a consensus on every conceivable subject. What is needed is to respect one another’s points of view and not to impute unworthy motives to one another or to seek to impugn the integrity of the other. Our maturity will be judged by how well we are able to agree to disagree and yet to continue to love one another, to care for one another and cherish one another and seek the greater good of the other (Tutu 2004:22).

The danger that a plurality of cultures poses is the inevitability of crises. In Tutu’s family metaphor, what binds a family together is not agreement, interest or commonness, but tolerance, unconditional love to all and for all. In this regard, Tutu describes the whole of humanity as being loved by, and belonged to, God. Therefore, Tutu says:

Sometimes we shocked them at home in South Africa when we said, the apartheid state president and I, whether we liked it or not, were brothers. And I had to desire and pray for the best for him. Jesus said, ‘I, if I be lifted up, will draw all to me’. Not some, but all. And it is a radical thing that Jesus says that we are members of one family. We belong. So Arafat and Sharon belong together. Yes, George Bush and Osama bin Laden belong together. God says, All, all are My children. It is shocking. It is radical (Tutu 2004:20).

Tutu explains it all in the above quote. Family love transcends belief systems, values, cultural interests, ideologies, religious, gender and ecclesiastical affiliations; sexual orientation; race and national boundaries (Tutu 2004:43-50).

Back to the question: *How can we distinguish interculturalism from multiculturalism?* Masenya and Snyman's arguments represent the multiculturalism school, especially with regard to the African agency discourse. Masenya insists that there are different belief systems, values, ideological interests between whites and blacks. Hence, whites cannot be on the side of blacks even in the post-apartheid South Africa. To her, whites and blacks draw on different and antagonistic myths of success and social and economic order that find their "legitimizing moral base in different meta-narratives" (Balcomb 2003:15). The cultures that direct and inform the so-called Western theology (academia) are different and notoriously incompatible with the interest of the Africans to emancipate their "own" via the academia. This conviction is grounded in the fact that white academics in South Africa find their academic home and interest in the West; the Western professors are their comrades and the African scholars, no matter how well-established academics they may be, fail to impress the white South African scholars. Hence, according to Masenya, only Western based academics are invited as visiting professors at supposedly African universities in South Africa.

Snyman in his reaction to Masenya and the whole African agency discourse, which he describes elsewhere as a "replica" of the apartheid racist discourse (Snyman 2005:323-325), expresses similar sentiments as those of the "competing ideologies" school of thought espoused clearly in the works of famous South African black theologians like Itumeleng Mosala (see 1986, 1989) and Takatso Mafokeng (see 1983, 1986, 1989). Instead of advocating for dialogue and interaction between the thoughts of discussants in the African agency discourse, Snyman attempts to absolve himself of any blame of involvement in, and benefiting from, the apartheid system. Therefore, unlike West, he does not see himself having any responsibility to the blacks or Africans in the present day South Africa!

Snyman is at pains to show that Euro-Africans are caught up in crossfire in the "war" between Africans and the West in post-colonial discourses in Africa (see 2002, 2005). The picture that Snyman and Masenya paint of post-apartheid (South) Africa is that of conflicting ideologies and cultures, producing different theologies and "set of values competing for the moral high ground" (Balcomb 2003:15-18). Both Masenya and Snyman insist that because there are differences between white values and black values, they (values) represent different interests and cultures. Therefore, theologies arising from those values cannot help but be different. The two South African scholars (Masenya and Snyman) do not see black and white cultures, values and interests interacting with each other to produce a "family" of theologies and people in (South) Africa. This implies that Masenya and Snyman directly or indirectly emphasize multiculturalism in their arguments.

West and Tutu represent an interculturalism school of theology. West is convinced that his white male and middle-class status is now partially constituted by his work with the black poor and the margins in the society. He thinks that he has a role, a responsibility namely, to use the skills he had acquired in his place of privilege to empower the previously underprivileged groups, who are still struggling for emancipation even in a post-apartheid (South) Africa. He is still different. He is trained, but the communities he works with are not. He is white they are black Africans. He belongs to the middle class in South Africa, the blacks he works with are poor, since they live in a culture of perpetual poverty. West enjoys the splendour of the Western capitalist economy. Nevertheless, the middle-classed West and the poor blacks are constituted by each other. They disagree on the way

they appropriate and interpret the Bible. Yet, what binds them together the most is the different resources they both bring to the reading “with”. They learn from each other by complementing each other.

Therefore, Tutu speaks of *Ubuntu*, a person being a person through other persons (see also Koopman 2003a:199-204 & 2003b:78-79). A socially engaged biblical scholar is “reading” because there are “readings” of the poor and the marginalized communities with whom he “reads”. Both the poor communities and the socially engaged biblical scholar are partially constituted by each other. They are a “family” praying together and “reading” together. The black communities love and appreciate the white scholar. Though previously enemies by virtue of their race and cultures, they are now a family. They interact with one another. Hence, Tutu speaks of Bush and Osama bin Laden being brothers. The apartheid president and Tutu are brothers. There is an interface between the holders of different views; people with different cultures relating with each other; belonging together instead of competing with each other. This is interculturality.

### **Facilitating a Move from Multiculturality to Interculturality: Towards Interculturality in (South) Africa**

In order to facilitate a move from multiculturalism to interculturality we need to firstly broaden the discourse, especially African agency discourse, to accommodate all races, all cultures, all nations, all theologies, all hermeneutics and all the people of Africa. At present, it looks like the discourse is stuck in the apartheid-anti-apartheid controversy. Also, it seems to be partially limited to blacks, and in the South African version of it, to South African blacks hence, the description of white discussants in the discourse as an unacceptable intrusion. Do other African theologians or biblical scholars see white participation in the discourse as an intrusion?

Furthermore, the concept “Africa” too needs to be redefined. Masenya and Snyman argue as if there is no other Africa apart from South Africa. South Africa is just one of the countries in Africa. All South Africans are by definition Africans. There are white Africans in Egypt, Arab Africans in Libya, very dark Africans in Sierra-Leon and many more. Africans outside South Africa have different cultures, different values and religious persuasions but are nevertheless Africans. Africa is not only defined by culture, race, economic power, type of education – whether Western or African – but more by geographical location and certain designed purposes. The interlocutors of theology in Africa should not be restricted to certain segments of Africa or Africans. Of course those who would rather choose to be Europeans and yet South Africans are at liberty to do so. After all, some black South Africans do not consider themselves Africans as Masenya admits (2002). However, should that be the case, Africa will be again stuck in a multiculturalism of the worse kind: The irrational dualism of being a European and South African at the same time; the one of being a South African but not African, the one of knowing no other home outside South Africa but yet not being African; the one of living together in one country for centuries but not belonging together, among others.

Secondly, we need to begin a process capable of bringing about a true “conversion” of heart on the part of the multiculturalism school discussed in the previous section. Real interculturality takes place only where there is an interface between one culture or group of cultures and the others; between different theological schools; between different segments of a society where the different groups, segments and theologies are partially “constituted” by each other. Interculturality will take place where and when white and black Africans are

responsible to one another in the efforts to theologically or hermeneutically respond to the challenges of Africa and of Africans.

To use Tutu's words, Masenya is a sister of Snyman (where Snyman is a symbol of a perpetrator of apartheid brutalities) and Snyman is Masenya's brother (where Masenya is a symbol of a victim of apartheid)! If that is possible, why would it be difficult for Snyman to participate in a theological discourse opened by Masenya?

Thirdly, our theologies must compliment each other. In this globalising Africa it is difficult to see a theology arising from Africa that is distinctively African or European. *Ubuntu* anthropology, an African anthropology, is being developed as an alternative to Cartesian egocentric anthropology of Europe (see Koopman 2003a & 2003b; Tutu 1999 & 2004). In this sense, there hardly can be an African-Western theology. Theology arising from, and developed out of Africa, is simply theology done by Africans be they African theologians, black theologians or white theologians. Theologians in Africa should therefore build up a culture of complimenting their works and ideas. This will in turn produce intercultural theology just as the Nigerian Chris Manus has developed intercultural hermeneutics (2003).

Fourthly, for interculturalism to take place, various theologians or scholars generally, must be constituted by their work with the "other". If whites participate in theological or other discourses, they should, at least, be able to identify with those with whom and for whom they theologised. Some of the criticism levelled against white participation in black discourses is that they turn to be "fraudulent" (Maluleke & Nadar 2004a and 2004b). In order not to be branded "opportunistic discussants" in African agency theological discourse, the white discussants should shay away from excluding themselves from the communities for whom they are theologising. This is precisely what Snyman failed to do in his works cited earlier.

Fifthly, black theologians and black communities should build a culture of hospitality. The concept "hospitality" is used here in a moral and theological sense described by Robert Vosloo (Stellenbosch University). He describes this hospitality as follows:

The challenge posed by moral crisis does not merely ask for tolerance and peaceful co-existence or some abstract pleas for community, but for an ethos of hospitality. The opposite of cruelty and hostility is not simply freedom from the cruel and hostile relationship, but hospitality. Without an ethos of hospitality it is difficult to envisage a way to challenge economic injustice, racism and xenophobia, lack of communication, the recognition of the rights of another, etc. Hospitality is a prerequisite for a more public life (2003:66).

Without this kind of hospitality it is difficult to facilitate a move from multiculturalism to interculturalism in (South) Africa.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, it is not out of place to refer to a factual story written by Balcomb as follows:

Just down the road from the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of KwaZulu Natal, there used to be a well-known middle-aged white male tramp begging outside a shopping centre. He was obviously an alcoholic and his condition used to vary with his level of intake, but on the whole he was the picture of the down and out. Besides the odd Christian praying for him he was largely ignored by passing pedestrians. One day I saw a black woman, younger than he and obviously working class poor, in the crouched position of respect, trying to get lower than he was slouching on the pavement, giving him some money, with the traditional two-

handed mode of giving to someone of higher status than oneself. What value system, one must ask, was informing that woman, that she makes such a gesture that contradicts the entire value system of a Western consumerist society. Here is a black working class female, probably at the bottom of the social hierarchy, giving respectfully to a white male, symbol of her oppressor, in an attitude of profound and undeserved respect? (2003:22).

It is quite remarkable that a white male and middle class South African Systematic theologian reports the story and not a black South African theologian. To link this story with the discussion in the previous sections the following questions come to mind: Who will Snyman identify with in the story? Will it be the white male or the black woman? If Snyman is at pains to defend Charlene Smith, a white South African woman who emigrated to the States when President Thabo Mbeki takes on her supposedly racial portrait of “all” black South Africans as rapists (see Snyman 2005:323-325), one doubts that Snyman could do what Balcomb has done by identifying with the good moral virtue of the black woman. A virtue Balcomb sees as paradigmatic of a kind of hospitality that is needed for an intercultural public morality in (South) Africa. Similarly, we need to ask if Masenya would have cared to do what the black woman had done, given her obsession to exclude white South Africans from Africa.

The black woman in Balcomb’s story is exhibiting the kind of ethic and social anthropology that Tutu proposed. Balcomb’s identification with the moral imperative of the black woman’s actions for a public (South) Africa is similar to the commitment of West, who is partially constituted by his work with black communities. The black woman’s hospitality is an indication that, in some respects, Africa is in the process of moving away from multiculturalism towards interculturality. Her action contradicts the known values of the Western capitalist world. Furthermore, her action indicates that neither Western nor African cultures inherently contain a set of universally applicable norms capable of building an intercultural society on this continent. Therefore, the interdependence of cultures and values as well as human beings is the only option for interculturality in (South) Africa.

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