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إفريقيا وتحديات القرن الواحد والعشرين

**DRAFT VERSION  
NOT TO BE CITED**

**"Potted Plants in Greenhouses": A Critical Reflection  
on the Resilience of Colonial Education in Africa**

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**5 - 9 / 12 / 2011**

**Rabat Maroc / Morocco**

## **Introduction**

Education is the inculcation of facts as knowledge and also a set of values used in turn to appraise the knowledge in question. When the values are not appropriate or broadly shared, the knowledge acquired is rendered irrelevant and becomes merely cosmetic or even violent. In Africa, the colonial conquest of Africans – body, mind and soul – has led to real or attempted epistemicide – the decimation or near complete killing and replacement of endogenous epistemologies with the epistemological paradigm of the conqueror. The result has been education through schools and other formal institutions of learning in Africa largely as a process of making infinite concessions to the outside – mainly the western world. Such education has tended to emphasise mimicry over creativity, and the idea that little worth learning about, even by Africans, can come from Africa. It champions static dichotomies and boundedness of cultural worlds and knowledge systems. It privileges teleology and analogy over creative negotiation by Africans of the multiple encounters, influences and perspectives evident throughout their continent. It thus impoverishes the complex realities of those it attracts or represses as students.

In this paper I propose to show how the values acquired during the colonial era that teach the superiority of the coloniser set the tone for the imbibing of knowledge and continue to dominate education and life in postcolonial Africa. The result is that the knowledge needed for African development is rendered irrelevant by a limited and limiting set of values. I argue for recognition of ongoing popular creative processes of negotiation as ordinary Africans seek conviviality between competing and conflicting influences.

## **Dominant and Dormant Epistemologies**

Those who move or are moved tend to position themselves or be positioned in relation to those they meet. Who gets to move why and how determines whose version of what encounters is visible or invisible in local and global marketplaces of ideas. Those with the power to cultivate and enforce ambitions of dominance define and humble in their “culture game” (Oguibe 2004). Hence the African proverb which states that “until the lions [prey] produce their own historian, the story of the hunt will glorify only the hunter” (Achebe 2000:73). To educate in postcolonial Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, without making visible the dignity, creativity and humanity of Africans, is to perpetuate Joseph Conrad’s imagery of Africa as “heart of darkness” (Conrad, [1899] 1995:90). The production, positioning and consumption of knowledge is far from a neutral, objective and disinterested process. It is socially and politically mediated by hierarchies of humanity and human

agency imposed by particular relations of power (Bourdieu 2004:18-21). Far from being a “liberating force” that celebrates “achievement” over “ascription”, education “plays a critical role in the reproduction of the distribution of cultural capital and thus in the reproduction of the structure of social space”. It is drawn upon by the elite to stake claims “in the struggle for the monopoly on dominant positions” and serves as a “legitimizing illusion”. The elite are its primary victims and primary beneficiaries (Bourdieu 1996:5). In Africa, the real victims are ordinary men and women and their endogenous alternatives.

Elsewhere, I have raised the issue of unequal encounters between the highly mobile dominant colonial epistemology and popular endogenous epistemologies of Africa in connection with witchcraft and the occult (Nyamnjoh 2001). An earlier version (Nyamnjoh 2004a) of the present paper explored epistemological issues which I revisit here with greater depth and nuance. The colonial epistemology reduces science to nineteenth and twentieth century preoccupations with theories of *what* the universe is, much to the detriment of theories of *why* the universe is. In the social sciences, it privileges scholarship by analogy (Mamdani 1996:9-16) and the “ethnographic present” – hence the popularity of liberal anthropology as handmaiden of colonialism – over and above historical ethnography and continuity (Wolfe 1999:43-68). By rendering science “too technical and mathematical”, this epistemology has made it difficult for those interested in questions of *why* to keep pace with developments in scientific theories (Hawking 1988:171-175) and increased the risk of branding as “intellectual imposture” the appropriation of scientific concepts by philosophers and other “non-scientists” (Sokal and Bricmont 1998). This epistemology has little room for popular cravings to understand “the underlying order in the world”. Its narrow view of science has tended to separate the universe into nature and culture, the physical and the metaphysical or religious, and to ignore the fact that people are ordinarily “not content to see events as unconnected and inexplicable” (Hawking 1988:1-13). Although science has since moved beyond this limited version to contemplate “the big bang and black holes”, and “a quantum theory of gravity” (Hawking 1988), its narrow and hegemonic “certainties” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries continue to make waves and inform the social sciences, attitudes, policies and relations in general.

I have argued (Nyamnjoh 2001) that this colonial and colonising epistemology has serious weaknesses, especially when compared with popular and more endogenous epistemologies. It tends to limit reality to appearances (the observable, the here and now, the

ethnographic present, the quantifiable), which it then seeks to justify (without explaining) with meta-narratives claiming objectivity and a more epistemologically secure truth status.

The science (natural and social) inspired by such an epistemology has tended to celebrate dichotomies, dualisms, teleologies and analogies, dismissing anything that does not make sense in Cartesian or behaviourist terms, confining to religion and metaphysics what it cannot explain and disqualifying as non-scientific more inclusive epistemologies. This epistemology's logic is simple and problematic: it sacrifices pluriversity for universality and imposes a one best way of attaining singular and universal truth. Those who have "seen the light" are the best guides for the rest still in search. This evokes the image of a Jacob's ladder, where those highest on the rungs are best placed to see Heaven and tell everyone else what paradise is, could be or should be. We may all be animated by partial theories – like the six blind men in John Godfrey Saxe's poem "The Blind Men and the Elephant" –, but some are more likely to claim authority and silence others about the nature of the universe and the underlying order of things, in line with the hierarchy of blindness made explicit in this epistemology.

Whole societies, countries and regions have been categorised, depending on how these "others" were perceived in relation to Cartesian rationalism and its empiricist, disembodied expectations of modernity (Amin 1980, 2006, 2010; Ferguson 1990, 1999, 2006). The epistemology has resulted in social science disciplines and fields of study that have sacrificed morality, humanity and the social on the altar of a conscious or implied objectivity that is at best phoney. It has allowed the insensitivities of power and comfort to assume the moral high ground, dictating to the marginalised and the disabled, and preaching salvation and promising "development" for individuals and groups who repent from "retrogressive" attitudes, cultures, traditions and practices. As an epistemology that claims the status of a solution, there is little room for introspection or self-scrutiny. Countervailing forces are invariably to blame for "failure". Such messianic qualities have imbued practitioners of this epistemology with an attitude of arrogance, superiority and intolerance towards *creative* difference and appropriation. Its evangelical zeal to convert creative difference has not excluded resorting to violence, for the epistemology knows neither compromise nor negotiation, nor conviviality.

Popular epistemologies in Africa are different. Indeed, popular epistemologies *everywhere* are different, for "the colonial endeavour in Africa and elsewhere was part of reformist modernity's project of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century European elite (highly educated upper bourgeoisie)

and a few aristocracies”<sup>1</sup>. Popular epistemologies create room for *why* questions, and for “magical interpretations” where there are no obvious explanations to material predicaments (Moore and Sanders 2001). In them, reality is more than meets the eye. It is larger than logic. Far from subscribing to rigid dichotomies, popular epistemologies build bridges between the so-called natural and supernatural, physical and metaphysical, rational and irrational, objective and subjective, scientific and superstitious, nature and culture, visible and invisible, real and unreal, explainable and inexplicable. Inherent in the approaches is the recognition of the impossibility for anything to be one without also being the other. They constitute an epistemological order where the sense of *sight* and *physical evidence* has not assumed the same centrality, dominance and dictatorship evident in the colonial epistemology and its “hierarchies of perceptual faculties” (van Dijk and Pels 1996:248-251). The real is not only what is observable or what makes cognitive sense; it is also the invisible, the emotional, the sentimental, the intuitive and the inexplicable (Tutuola 1952; Okri 1991). Emphasis is on the whole, and truth is negotiated.

In popular systems of knowledge, the opposite or complement of presence is not necessarily absence, but that which is beyond the power of the senses to render observable. Thus, as Mbembe (1997) argues, understanding the visible is hardly complete without investigating the invisible. We misunderstand the world if we “consider the obverse and the reverse of the world as two opposite sides, with the former partaking of a “being there” (*real presence*) and the latter as “being elsewhere” or a “non-being” (*irremediable absence*) or, worse, of the order of unreality” (Mbembe 1997:152). The obverse and its reverse are also linked by similarities which do not make them mere copies of each other, but which unite and at the same time distinguish themselves according to the “principle of *simultaneous multiplicities*” (Mbembe 1997:152), central to popular epistemologies in Africa.

Rather than draw from these popular epistemologies, however, in constructing modern society, the wholesale adoption of the colonial epistemology has ensnared the dominant class elements of African societies to the point that they treat it as some kind of invincible magic. Nowhere is this more evident than in African attitudes toward the educational systems and values of the European world as transplanted to and reflected on African soils. This begs the question: “What role could less restrictive epistemologies play, in education and development?”

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<sup>1</sup> René Devisch, comment, 1 April 2011



## **Education as cultural violence, self-hate and mimicry**

### *Colonial Commencements*

Colonialism is essentially a violent project. It repressed where it should have fostered, tamed instead of inspired and enervated rather than strengthened. It succeeded in making slaves of its victims, to the extent that they no longer realise they are slaves, with some even seeing their chains of victimhood as ornamental and the best recognition possible (Fonlon 1965:21-28).

With the advent of colonial education, Africans were devalued in the same measure and order that Europeans were glorified. Men and women who embraced it were reduced to a shadow of themselves, making it extremely difficult for them to question the virility and authority of their white masters, who loathed inquisitiveness and preached blind faith from those they lorded over (p'Bitek 1989:62-68). The involvement of the missionary church in education (Amadiume 1987:119-143, 1997:183-198; Denzer 1992 Musisi 1992; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997b:274-322), created "an unprecedented alliance of State, Capital and Church" that "gave a divine aura and authority to the colonial brainwashing, whitening and subjection" of Africans<sup>2</sup>. Together with armed might, the colonialists used education to disarm and silence Africans in mind, soul and body and to reduce their warriors into "cringing cowards". Colonial education privileged pleasure amongst the privileged few and "the hoarding of wealth, of money, as the surest road to pleasure" (Fonlon 1965:18-19).

It made "dead fruit" even of the sons of chiefs, who behaved "like foolish...little children" towards their past and the ways of their land (p'Bitek 1989:12) – including rejecting meaningful local names and adopting "the names of white men" that all sounded like "empty tins, old rusty tins thrown down from the roof-top" (p'Bitek 1989:62), attracting songs of laughter instead of songs of praise. It was an education to cultivate a "bitter tongue" – "fierce like the arrow of a scorpion", "deadly like the spear of the buffalo-hornet", "ferocious like the poison of a barren woman", and "corrosive like the juice of the gourd" – vis-à-vis one's past, one's traditions, one's people, one's relations (p'Bitek 1989:12-14). Those emasculated and neutralised by colonial education in turn seek to neutralise and emasculate all those and everything around them. They fancy and favour imported thinking and things in their European greenhouses under African skies.

This, to Lawino (p'Bitek 1989:25-41), was unacceptable: "My husband, I do not complain that you eat white men's foods. If you enjoy them go ahead! Shall we just agree to have freedom

to eat what one likes?" Lawino commented how Clementine, her husband Ocol's girlfriend, wore "the hair... of some white woman who died long ago". Little wonder that Ocol and Clementine - the "modern" educated man and woman in p'Bitek's (1989) *Song of Lawino* - are incapable of producing or reproducing anything of substance, preoccupied as they are with ostentatious consumption (ballroom dances, white people's foods, dressing and speaking like whites, naming themselves after and following the religion of whites) to demonstrate the value of so-called "modern education". The "thirst for ease", "craving for luxury", and "itch to get rich quick" are still "running riot everywhere" (Fonlon 1965:23-26), despite herculean needs for social transformation. Few cases of radical nationalism have survived neutralisation after independence (Fanon 1967a:118-165), as colonialism has always succeeded in staying on despite its formal ending. In South Africa, the achievements of Steve Biko and his "Black Consciousness" movement in using the popular creativity of everyday life (music, song, poetry, etc.) in classrooms, churches, neighbourhoods and townships as effective resources in anti-apartheid struggles, in the promotion of knowledge of protest history, and in affirming the integrity and humanity of marginalised black masses and their cultures (Mngxitama et al. 2008a; Pityana et al.1991; Malusi and Mphumlwana 1996), seem to have suffered a major reversal under the new, negotiated post-apartheid dispensation (Ramoso 2003, 2004, 2010; Mngxitama et al. 2008a&b; Gumede and Dikeni 2009). This is a fate not dissimilar to that of other anti-colonial and resistance movements in Africa and beyond, where aspirations for liberation and self-determination have almost invariably been watered down to accommodate continuity for the value system and interests of the dominator, who champions divide and rule to compound the predicaments of the marginalised masses.

Ocol, who epitomises the post-independence "modern", "progressive and civilised man", can do little more than pour "scorn on Black people" who he says are "primitive", "ignorant, poor and diseased". The fact of his having "read extensively and widely" only alienates him from his folks, making of him a clearing officer for the white man, his ideas and his values in Africa - a sort of stranger or outsider within. He declares himself unable to live with his wife any longer, because she is "a thing", "just a village woman", "an old type" who is "no longer attractive" and "cannot distinguish between good and bad". She is "blocking his progress" and he must clear the way for Clementine, the "modern woman" he loves, and "who

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<sup>2</sup> René Devisch, comment, 1 April 2011

speaks English" (p'Bitek 1989:14). This is a recurrent and well known theme in African writing about the betrayal and irrelevance that come with the uncritical internalisation of colonial and colonising yardsticks of being educated and being modern.

Like his counterparts elsewhere on the continent, Ocol becomes dangerous to kin and kith. He "behaves like a hen that eats its own eggs, a hen that should be imprisoned under a basket" (p'Bitek 1989:14). Lawino laments the fact: "When my husband is reading a new book or when he is sitting in his sofa, his face covered up completely with the big newspaper," not only does he look like a corpse in a tomb, he is so silent and so viciously anti-social that he "storms like a buffalo" and "throws things" at any child who cries, saying "that children's cries and coughs disturb him!" But "what music is sweeter than the cries of children?" "Who but a witch would like to live in a homestead where all the grown-ups are so clean after the rains, because there are no muddy fat kids to fall on their bosoms after dancing in the rains and playing in the mud?" (p'Bitek 1989:45-51). An education that transforms people into unthinking zombies, kills their sociality, and numbs their humanity even for their own children can hardly be relevant to social reproduction, let alone social transformation.

An education to hate questions is hardly one to provide answers. Ocol "has read deeply and widely" to the point of making his house "a dark forest of books", but because he is educated not to engage and question, but to prescribe and dictate deafly and condescendingly, his education is not relevant to African modes of fruitful self-knowledge and self-reproduction. "Ocol has lost his head in the forest of books". "[T]he reading has killed" him "in the ways of his people". It is as if his "testicles were smashed with large books!", and he has become "a walking corpse" (P'Bitek 1989:91-95). Little wonder that African elites exhibit an "inability to fertilize thought and action in any meaningful sense" (Ajei 2007:6). But they enjoy recognition in the eyes of the white man, as "the good children", "who ask no questions, who accept everything... like the rubbish pit, like the pit-latrine which does not reject even dysentery". Ocol is liked and patted on the back by his white masters, for asking no questions, for his unconditional subservience (p'Bitek 1989:64).

Lawino on the other hand is full of questions, but the few white men and women she has encountered "never stop a little while to answer even one". "[A]s soon as they stop shouting" in the name of preaching and teaching, "they run away fast", almost as if afraid to be discovered for what they truly are - "ignorant". And when she is able to catch up with them, "they are angry with me" for asking questions. Even Ocol, her learned husband, dashes her hopes. If



Lawino asks him a question, she is “insulting him”. Instead of answering the question, “he opens up with a quarrel” and “begins to look down upon” her, saying her questions “are a waste of time”, “silly questions, typical questions from village girls”, “questions of uneducated people, useless questions from untutored minds”. To him, Lawino has “a tiny little brain” that “is not trained” and that “cannot see things intelligently” or “sharply”. He claims that even if he tried to answer her questions, she would not understand what he was saying, because she “has not been to school”, and “a university man can only have useful talk with another university man or woman”. The language he speaks is different from hers, “so that even if he spoke to me in Acoli I would still need an interpreter.” But being “a primitive language” of “very few words”, Acoli “is not rich enough to express his deep wisdom”. Acoli “is not like the white man’s language, which is rich and very beautiful, a language fitted for discussing deep thoughts”. And so Lawino is forced to “swallow the questions” that “burn inside me”. “[M]y eyes redden with frustration and I tremble with anger” (p’Bitek 1989:62-66). Lawino’s frustration and anger have, in other victims of colonial education, resulted in chronic self-doubt, self-deprecation, and self-annihilation.

To be socially visible, those converted within the framework of this education crave external recognition and environments over internal relevance. They internalise and reproduce irrelevance through an unjustifiable sense of superiority and priorities. They “boast in the marketplace showing off to people”, instead of proving the merits of their education through real achievements (p’Bitek 1989:68). It is an education for keeping up appearances, for self-delusion and self-belittlement, and for talking without listening (p’Bitek 1989:12-14). Those who embrace colonial education fully become like slaves, doing the bidding of capricious and whimsical masters, and looking foolish before those who have stood their ground in the face of the violence of conversion.

To Lawino, “My husband’s master is my husband’s husband. My husband runs from place to place like a small boy, he rushes without dignity”, doing the bidding of the white man. Rendered blind by the libraries of white men, Ocol has lost his dignity and authority by behaving “like a dog of the white man”, lying by the door to “keep guard while waiting for leftovers” from the master’s table. He has lost his “fire” and bull-like prowess and has succumbed to living on borrowed food, wearing borrowed clothes, and using his ideas, actions and behaviour “to please somebody else”. He may have read extensively and deeply and can challenge the white men in his knowledge of their books and their ancestors of the intellect, but

to Lawino, this has come at a great price: "the reading has killed my man, in the ways of his people. He has become a stump. He abuses all things Acoli; he says the ways of black people are black" (p'Bitek 1989:91-96). And if Ocol has chosen the path of passive and sterile subservience, let him not, in frustration, "shout at me because I know the customs of our people", customs that make him feel so desperately inferior to the white man (p'Bitek 1989:46).

The ways of Lawino's ancestors may be good and solid with roots that reach deep into the soil, their customs neither hollow, nor thin, nor easily breakable or blown away by the winds, but this does not deter colonial education and its converts such as her husband Ocol and Clementine, "the woman with whom I share my husband", from despising these ancestral customs and worldview, in favour of foreign customs little understood, admired or desired (p'Bitek 1989:19). Neglected, insulted and abused, Lawino reminds her husband without relent that no education makes sense if it turns one against one's people and against the ways of one's ancestors: "Listen Ocol, my friend, the ways of your ancestors are good, their customs are solid and not hollow. They are not thin, not easily breakable. They cannot be blown away by the winds, because their roots reach deep into the soil" (p'Bitek 1989:19). Closely entangled with ideology and hegemony as the education is, it leaves little room for critical thinking even as it celebrates Cartesian rationalism. The result, quite paradoxically, is an emphasis on doing rather than thinking, and all attempts at serious questioning and exploration of alternatives are rationalised away by the dominant voices of mimicry, conformism, myopia, and "stupid stubbornness" (p'Bitek 1989:95-98).

In his song of response to his wife, Ocol insists, with the pseudo power of a castrated man: "Woman, shut up! Pack your things and go!" As like someone blinded to the fetters and mimicry that have violated his autonomy and authority, Ocol compares Lawino's song to "the mad bragging of a defeated general", "the pointless defiance of the condemned", "rotting buffalo left behind by fleeing poachers", and "sour sweet", among other negative representations to depict her backwardness and the "blackness, deep, deep fathomless darkness" that "is Africa" to him. He has no time for the "idle giant basking in the sun, sleeping, snoring, twitching in dreams", that is Africa - "diseased with a chronic illness, choking with black ignorance, chained to the rock of poverty", "stuck in the stagnant muds of superstitions" - and cannot understand "why I was born black". He promises annihilation for everything Lawino stands for, everything African: "Put in detention all the preachers of Negritude" and "To the gallows with all the Professors of Anthropology, and teachers of African History, a

bonfire we'll make to their works, we'll destroy all their anthologies of African literature and close down all the schools of African Studies". It is imperative, he argues with categorical zeal, to "smash all these mirrors that I may not see the blackness of the past from which I came". If independence means an excuse to reinvent the past, then such "uhuru" must never come to pass (p'Bitek 1984:121-151).

Colonial education, like colonialism itself, was not a selfless "mission civilisatrice". It was meant to provide colonialism with the local support staff it needed to achieve its hegemonic imperialist purpose. The emphasis on basic literacy, numeracy, vocational training and domestic science favoured the colonial extractive project by underplaying the critical questioning that a more intellectual upbringing would have encouraged. Its tendency to encourage divide and rule meant that disparities arising from the lack of unified or uniform education offered by different bodies - colonial government and different and often warring missionary denominations within the colonies - set the stage for rising conflicting expectations and inequalities in education attainment and across different ethnic groups and colonially demarcated regions. Those favoured by the colonial system would at independence manipulate postcolonial education policy, admission to schools and access to scholarships for further education to the advantage of people from their regions and ethnic groups. The postcolonial state would find it increasingly difficult to balance up the equation, and where it has, those advantaged by the old system have resisted fairness on the pretext of merit or ambiguous claims of human rights and now minority rights. This buttresses the perspective that colonial education was and remains incompatible with the pursuit of *real* social responsiveness and *genuine* collective interests.

### ***Postcolonial Continuities: Excellence at Irrelevance***

If we take the preceding account of Lawino as a depiction of colonial education, under which Africans were defined and confined, and compelled to conform, one is bound to ask what has changed since independence. For one thing, calls have increased on the need to rethink educational systems in Africa. Soon after independence, Bernard Fonlon, in his seminal essay, "Idea of Culture", critiqued colonial education's emphasis on "unmanning" and called for a system capable of cultivating the dignity and authority of Africans and their ways of life (Fonlon 1965:21-28). Endogenous African cultures "must be the foundation on which the modern African cultural structure should be raised; the soil into which the new seed should be sown; the stem into which the new scion should be grafted; the sap that should enliven the entire organism"

(Aimé Césaire in Fonlon 1967). African cultures – the object of imperialist mockery, rejection and manipulation – need rehabilitation (Fonlon 1967:21-22). And so does the humanhood – severed by servitude and blind faith in the sterility of colonial education – of elite Africans like Ocol and Clementine (p'Bitek 1989:96-98). They need to be able to come out of their greenhouses, where they are cut off from their surroundings, and encounter everyday Africa.

“Endogenous” is used in this paper in opposition to the rather limited and limiting notion of “indigenous”, to evoke the dynamism, negotiability, adaptability and capacity for autonomy and interdependence, creativity and innovation in African societies and beyond. It counters the widespread and stubborn misrepresentation of African cultures as static, bounded and primitive, and of Africa as needing the benevolence and enlightenment of colonialism and Cartesian rationalism or their residues to come alive (Fonlon 1965; p'Bitek 1989; Ki-Zerbo 1992, 2003; Ela 1994; Hountondji 1997; Crossman and Devisch 1999, 2002; Crossman 2004; Nabudare 2006; Devisch 2007).

Joseph Ki-Zerbo (2010 [1972]:40) explained that “quand on prive des enfants de leur racines historiques, on risque de dépersonnaliser les peuples.” He, like others, was critical of elite Africans acting as “one legged intellectual” (*intellectuels unijambistes*) local clearing agents for the importation and proliferation of the “ideas of others”. To graduate or break free from European greenhouses and the uneasy comfort of sleeping on “the mat of others” (*la natte des autres*), he called on Africans to invest in self-knowledge and in scholarship informed by African experiences and perspectives (Ki-Zerbo 1992:1-71). Elite Africans, however enlightened in their extraversion, cannot win an epistemological fight against African masses, however misguided. Their scholarship would continue to resonate mainly with foreign consumers, insofar as it caricatures or frivolously dismisses local systems of knowing. Hence, Ki-Zerbo’s (1990, 1992, 2003) call for the “rooting” of Africa in its endogenous educational systems, to ensure an autonomous collective system for societal reproduction (see also Ela 1994; Hountondji 1997; Ramose 2003, 2004, 2010; Nabudare 2006). And the need for researchers of Africa to mingle and comeingle with Africa and Africans rather than merely observe them from a distance and continue to draw and circulate incorrectly and insufficiently informed conclusions.

Many have cautioned, as did Fonlon (1967:21-22), that “rehabilitation of African culture cannot be a mere archaeological enterprise”. It would be counterproductive “to dig up the past and live it as it was”. Hence the importance of considering and engaging with African cultures as the dynamic, nuanced, negotiated and open ended realities they are. Few today, except for

strategic essentialists, would treat African cultures as bounded and unchanging. “[I]t is imperative to steer clear of two extremes: on the one hand, the imperialist arrogance which declared everything African as only fit for the scrap-heap and the dust-bin, and, on the other hand, the overly enthusiastic and rather naive tendency to laud every aspect of African culture as if it were the quintessence of human achievement” (Fonlon 1967:21-22). This requires seeking conviviality and carefully navigating between Lawino and Ocol (p’Bitek 1984, 1989), the popular and the elite, the endogenous and the exogenous in Africa. “On balance it seems that irrational self-destruction in the name of money is the heritage of humanity from education. It is education without learning from experience” (Ramosé 2010:6). The future is in approaches to learning that value experience and in which it is recognised that Africans are actively endogenising modernity and modernising endogeneity. The “seeds” of alternatives to the totalising boia constrictor colonial paradigm are embedded in endogenous African thought and practices (Ajei 2007:10), and in popular processes of creative appropriation of multiple influences by Africans (Barber 1997). Manu Dibango (1994:88-130), whose music epitomises such processes, describes himself as “Négropolitain”, meaning “a man between two cultures, two environments, whose music cannot be confined to either, without losing its complexity and richness as the fruit of his creative appropriation of diverse influences.

Despite some encouraging examples, calls to rethink education in Africa are yet to be translated into action in any significant way. Education in Africa and for Africans continues to be like a pilgrimage to the Kilimanjaro of metropolitan intellectual ideals, but also the tortuous route to Calvary for alternative ways of life (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1986; Mazrui 1986, 2001; Mamdani 1990, 1993; Copans 1990; Rwomire 1992; van Rinsum 2001; Ramosé 2003, 2004). The value of education in postcolonial Africa can be understood in comparison with the soft currencies of the continent. Just as even the most stable of these currencies is pegged and used to taking nosedives in relation to the hard currencies of Europe and North America, so has the value of education on the continent. And just as African presidents prefer to beg and bank in foreign currencies – ignoring even banknotes that bear their own faces and stamp of omnipotence –, so is their preference for the foreign intellectual and expert over homegrown expertise. With rhetoric on the need to be competitive internationally, the practice since independence has been to model education in Africa after educational institutions elsewhere, with each country drawing from the institutions of the immediate past coloniser, and from the USA and Canada (Crossman and Devisch 1999:20-23; Mazrui 2001:39-45). Universities are

internationally rated using criteria which few universities in Africa have contributed to establishing, but to which they subject themselves. African universities push lecturers to publish in international journals yet do little to promote journals of the continent. In selecting a university, students consider the universities where their lecturers obtained PhD degrees, and (in South Africa) may consider criteria like catering and parking services, but hardly the relevance of curricula to local needs (Jansen 2011:10-153).

The elite have, just as in colonial times, “often in unabashed imitativeness” and with little attempt at domestication, sought to reproduce, even without the finances to sustain their efforts, the Oxforwards, Cambridges, Harvards, Stanfords and Sorbonnes of England, the USA and France (Mazrui 2001:39-8). Some, like the late Presidents Banda of Malawi, and Houphouët-Boigny of Cote d’Ivoire, sometimes carried this craving to ridiculous proportions, seeking to be identified by euophilia in education and consumption. Education in Africa has been and mostly remains a journey fuelled by an exogenously induced and internalised sense of inadequacy in Africans, and one endowed with the mission of devaluation or annihilation of African creativity, agency and value systems. Such “cultural estrangement” in the place of cultural engagement has served to reinforce in Africans self-devaluation and self-hatred and a profound sense of inferiority that in turn compels them to “lighten their darkness” both physically and metaphorically for the gratification of their colonial and postcolonial overlords (Fanon 1967a:169, 1967b). Nyang has described this predicament as “a pathological case of xenophilia”, whereby Africans are brought to value things foreign “not for their efficacy but simply because of their foreignness” (Nyang 1994:434) and persuaded to consume to death their creativity and dignity, their very own humanity (Soyinka 1994). This is carried through by students privileged to be part of exchange programmes involving African and European or North American universities. In these programmes, African students are only too ready to downplay their home institutions and professors, as they shop up for recognition by their European counterparts. The inverse experience of European and North American students is equally telling.

This culturally uprooting of Africans has been achieved literally by uprooting children of the well-off from their communities and nurturing them in boarding schools, “almost like potted plants in greenhouses” (Mamdani 1990:3), while relegating the children of the poor to what in South Africa has come to be known as “bantus education” (Ramose 2003, 2004, 2010; Jansen 2011:31-153). In the long run, neither the children of the lowly and poor, who in effect cannot afford the same chance to excel in this type of xenophilia, nor the children of the well-off schooled



in such appetites are in a position to contribute towards reflecting the complexity, dynamism and creativity in being African.

African universities have significantly Africanised their personnel, but not their curricula or pedagogical structures to any real extent (Crossman and Devisch 1999:11). The assumption has been that because one *is* or *appears* African however contentious, one is necessarily going to be critical of the colonial intellectual traditions, rituals and *habitus* in one's teaching and research, and offer a menu sensitive to local realities and endogenous epistemologies. But this is far from the case, as the hundreds of universities created after independence have stayed "triumphantly universalistic and uncompromisingly foreign" to local cultures, populations and predicaments (Mamdani 1993:11-15). There has been little effort at domestication or an epistemological renegotiation informed by local languages, cosmologies and worldviews (Devisch 2002; Jansen 2011: 31-153).

A classic example of excellence at irrelevance in education was provided by the late Kamuzu Banda's Malawi. I was fortunate, as a doctoral student in the United Kingdom (UK) to watch, with ethnographic instincts, a BBC television documentary on the extravagant mimicry and irrelevance of education in Africa. Broadcast at 9.30 pm, Tuesday, September 8, 1987, Malawi was singled out as an example of a country which had established a school that resembled Eton of England. The school, named Kamuzu Academy, was situated in the Kasungu District in the Central Region of Malawi, President Banda's home area. This school, nicknamed by some critics "Eton of the Bush", was built in 1981, and imported all its education equipment from the UK and South Africa. When the school was short of chemicals or other equipment, those concerned had to drive for at least five hundred miles for replenishment. The school had cost no less than 15 million British pounds to build and needed not less than 1 million pounds a year to run. The students, whose table manners would put many a working class Briton to shame, were, just like Ocol in *Song of Lawino*, made to believe that no one is truly educated unless s/he knows something about the ancient world, which should not be mistaken to mean the ancestral world of the African student, but the world of his/her imported European teachers - the world of Julius Caesar, Aristotle, Plato, Socrates and other founding fathers and mothers of European intellectual traditions. Thus, whether educated at the heart of the African periphery or at the very centre of the European metropolis, postcolonial education, like its colonial counterpart, is an impoverished menu of unequal encounters between Africa and the west.

If ancestors are supposed to lay the path for posterity, inviting Africans to forget their ancestors the way postcolonial African leaders like Banda did and have continued to do, is an invitation for Africans to be born again and socialised afresh, in the image of Europe, using European and North American type academic institutions and rituals of ancestral worship. This renewal, in tune with (neo)colonial values and institutions is achieved, by the west:

*promoting* beliefs and values congenial to [its dominance]; *naturalizing* and *universalizing* such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; *denigrating* ideas which might challenge it; *excluding* rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and *obscuring* social reality in ways convenient to itself (Eagleton 1991:5-6, original emphasis).

Through such strategies of legitimation and delegitimation, (neo)colonial education wiped “the blackboard clean” and turned its African students into slaves of colonial definitions (van Rinsum 2001; Okolo 2007). As nobody is ever “*wholly* mystified” or “a complete dupe”, an ideology can only succeed if those it characterises as inferior actually learn to be inferior. “It is not enough for a woman or colonial subject to be defined as a lower form of life. They must be actively *taught* this definition, and some of them prove to be brilliant graduates in this process” (Eagleton 1991:xv, original emphasis). Even then, people are always capable of unlearning what has defined and confined them to passive submission.

To actively teach, define and confine, absolute and meticulous care is taken in choosing teachers and determining curricula. A strategy for which Banda’s “Eton of the Bush” remains a classic example. All teachers in the Kamuzu Academy were white, recruited directly from Britain, and of course paid British rates at a time when few local teachers could make ends meet with their own salaries in the soft local currency. In the 1980s and 1990s, in the period the BBC documentary was broadcast, researchers found that teachers in Togo “did not consider education as a process that could generate social change, and few saw themselves as agents of change”. Researchers in Ghana noted the “mental stress suffered by teachers and the tendency to absent themselves from classrooms during school hours to engage in commercial activities” (Maclure 1997:52). Commitment and a sense of vocation were dwindling among teachers in Africa, who were “often underpaid and in some countries they were not paid at all for months on end” and were sometimes forced “to look for moonlighting opportunities to give them an additional livelihood” (Mazrui 1986:204). Meanwhile, in Malawi, imported teachers on three-year contracts lived in European-style bungalows with salaries in hard currencies. The same is now said of professors and other

expatriates from African countries suffering economic downturns working in African countries with better economies such as South Africa and Botswana by the citizens of the host countries, who do not always see the Africans in question as relevant and efficient (Nyamnjoh 2002, 2006).

*Plus ça change, plus c'est pareil.* Things seem to change, just as they stay the same throughout Africa. Almost everywhere, the consultancy syndrome has triumphed over academic values such as excellence in teaching, research and publication. University professors who have failed to migrate are forced to postpone academic excellence. Even the most inspiring of them are working under extremely difficult conditions for relevant creativity in teaching and research (Onyejekwe 1993; Zeleza and Olukoshi 2004a&b). That this remains a growing problem and concern can be seen in the regularity with which the matter was discussed by the Scientific and Executive Committees of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) from 2003 to 2009<sup>3</sup>. During that time, CODESRIA published several books on the challenges facing African universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the responsibilities of African intellectuals and African governments in the face of these challenges (Zeleza and Olukoshi 2004a&b; Mkwandawire 2005; Mamdani 2007). The *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* was launched and rapidly become an archive on many of the issues. In this regard, CODESRIA, as a pan-African scholarly network keen on promoting the production and consumption of knowledge informed by African perspectives and epistemologies, is playing a crucial role in re-enlivening and revalorising dismembered and disenchanting beliefs and systems of thought in Africa.

Postcolonial education has continued to privilege colonial languages (English, French, Portuguese, German, Spanish), paying little more than lip service to mother-tongue education in endogenous African languages (Chumbow 2005, 2009; Ngugi wa Thiong'o 2005). In studies from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali, Benin, Burkina Faso and Togo a "common thematic thread... is the striking discontinuity between French language use in formal education and the use of maternal languages in common everyday speech... In effect, the researchers have shown that when formal education is conducted in a language that is foreign to the children's environment, it can actually *retard* their capacity to learn" (Maclure 1997:33-34; original emphasis). Turning again to our classic example, English was and still is the main language of instruction at the Kamuzu Academy. Not only is the national language Chichewa not taught, students are forbidden to speak it in the Academy. Postcolonial instructors in Kenya who inherited condescending British attitudes toward

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<sup>3</sup> when I worked with the Council in Dakar as director of publications

local languages continued “to ban African languages in schools and to elevate English as the medium of instruction from primary to secondary stages” and did not hesitate to mete out corporal punishment to and extort fines from students “caught speaking their mother tongues” (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1997:620). Leading by example, Ngugi wa Thiong’o writes and publishes his novels in Gikuyu, his mother tongue, and only then has them translated into English. He speaks metaphorically of colonial languages as a third leg and compares Africans’ adoption of them as having to “borrow a third leg” (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 2005). This concern is not to deny the fact that many Africans beyond the elite are like octopi in their facility with language and the cohabitation of the multiple worldviews they reflect.

English and other European languages are given status by associating them with civilisation and enlightenment, while every attempt is made to reduce African languages to gibberish and chase them out of the mouths, ears and minds of African students born into these languages. African intellectuals who want to take the valorisation of endogenous African languages seriously have found themselves swimming against the tides. Invited to address the OAU (now AU) at Addis Ababa, Ali Mazrui insisted on doing so in Kiswahili, but there was neither translator nor switch button envisaged for one of Africa’s most widely spoken languages. “You needed to see how the Heads of States were bewildered, but I had passed my message across” (Mazrui 1986 BBC *The Africans* series). Unlike Somalia, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya, Mali, Burkina Faso, Botswana and South Africa, many an African country has yet to demonstrate in principle and practice that literacy, even at primary school level, does not necessarily mean knowing how to read and write a European language, even if Africanised.

Only a few African countries have bothered to adopt policies that encourage education in African languages. And even these countries tend to confine the importance of local languages to adult literacy training and to primary and secondary school education, thereby accentuating the remoteness and irrelevance of universities to the bulk of the population. With perhaps the exception of Tanzania, there is hardly a single sub-Saharan African university that “offers a full diploma programme with an African language as principal medium of instruction” (Crossman and Devisch 1999:7; Chumbow 2005, 2009). In many countries, there are ongoing debates on use of mother tongue in the early years of schooling. In some where state policies already exist encouraging mother tongue education, these policies are yet to be effectively implemented. There is resistance from parents who believe mother tongue education will dilute education standards, as students are called to operate in a globalised world and may eventually proceed to

universities where instruction is almost invariably in the colonial languages. Cosmopolitanism, a common national citizenship and mobility have meant increasing spatial integration for peoples of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, thereby posing the question of whose mother tongue qualifies where? Moreover, children of policymakers, like potted plants in greenhouses, attend private schools that follow, not the national curriculum, but the so-called international curriculum of European and North American schools. Without a personal interest in mother tongue education and national curricula, it is hard to see how policies in favour of endogenisation can be implemented.

Most African university libraries are underfunded, struggle to keep pace with the latest publications of relevance, and are often desperately under stocked and at the mercy of donors dying to dump old and outdated publications as a sort of intellectual “toxic” waste. Libraries that are well stocked even with material of direct relevance to critical scholarship informed by African perspectives and predicaments, may find such books and journals under-consulted because of curricula and scholarly traditions that pay scant attention to African sources. This was the case in the 2008 film *Nothing but the Truth* directed by playwright and actor John Kani in which the chief assistant librarian and main character Sipho Makhaya dreamily dusts off the collection of African literature on a bottom shelf and imagines, if promoted, of elevating it to a central space within the library.

The consequence in educational systems of inadequate and inappropriate resources combined with neglect and indifference produces graduates ill adapted to the African condition and market. “We’ve gone through systems that have destroyed rather than enriched us or enabled us” (Ezra Mbogori in Mama and Hamilton 2003:23). Graduates are often quite unaware – until much later in life – that their elite education, according to the Zimbabwean poet Fungai Machirori, “within this insular environment that cordoned us off from the reality of our country” was devoid of any real sense of place and left them “incomplete.”<sup>4</sup> Ki-Zerbo (2010:39) wrote about the “insular school” in Africa in 1972: “On a parfois comparé l’école actuelle à un bois sacré où n’entreraient qu’un certain nombre d’initiés chargés d’opérer des rites ésotériques échappant à tout le monde. Même sans clôture on sent qu’il y a une enceinte invisible...” Universities are “sterile bubbles” in which, according to Okwah Abagi, “most of us tend to be conditioned to think for the west”. Takyiwaa Manuh explains that “the wellsprings of our intellectual thoughts are often so divorced

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<sup>4</sup> Source “Incompletely me” in *South Africa’s Mail & Guardian*, March 18 to 24, 2011, pp. 45-46; see online at <http://mg.co.za/article/2011-03-18-incompletely-me>.

from the realities of the lives of our people..." (Mama and Hamilton 2003: 28-26). The coming of internet and its possibilities for uploading and downloading content, together with the rise of digital and open publishing, means greater prospects for and access to African perspectives and perhaps a mitigation of the book famine in Africa (Beebe et al. 2003). It also means possibilities for "crossing" and creatively negotiating those physical and invisible boundaries that have cut schools and universities off from the world around them.

Even when the finances are there, there is no guarantee that African political and intellectual leaders have the will to do what is right for African education. By way of example yet again, at the Kamuzu Academy, where the neo-Etonians were trained to recite Shakespeare and glorify the classic philosophers of the metropolis, the library that housed the classics was deliberately designed in the image of the Library of Congress in the United States of America (USA). From it, students imbibed an awful lot of Latin, Classical Music, Western History, Literature and Etiquette and consumed a lot of McDonaldised entertainment television. As the presenter of the BBC documentary observed, the students knew more about Europe than they did about Malawi, so much so that once in a while, the teachers had to organise field trips with the students "partly to bring their own country home to them". Parents, he went on, sacrificed too much for their children to acquire values and an education, which were alien to their cultures of origin. This, of course, is hardly news to other Africans who have drunk from the well of "modern education" in similarly western-styled institutions modelled on the colonial educational system (Mazrui 1986:233). Instead of dwindling and withering away, such neo-Etonian schools are on the increase, as the need to provide an education adapted to and in tune with the needs of globetrotting expatriates and frequent flyer Africans with an appetite and ambition for global consumerism grows. But then, this criticism could well be exaggerated. Ignatio Malizani Jimu, associate professor of Geography at Mzuzu University in Malawi, agrees the Academy was no doubt an expensive venture but maintains the school was not built for the elite:

It was established to make elite of the non-elite given that while Banda ruled, selection into the Academy was not based on being monied but being brilliant. At that time Malawi's post primary schools were clearly hierarchized and the Academy was one of the rungs on this ladder. It is even exaggeration to suggest that students were spoiled. One of my brothers passed through the Academy and many of my friends too, but they are just cool guys. To some degree this critique reflects the patronizing attitude of the west (Ignatio Malizani Jimu, comment, 26 March 2011).



There are different ways of journeying to the west. One can undertake the journey physically or psychologically (through fantasy, admiration and desire) with facilitation from education and global consumer media. Either way, one imbibes European influences. European-style training at Kamuzu Academy-type institutions is not just to compensate for the real Europe and North America where these students have not yet been. It is seen as preparing them for these places, where they ultimately go or yearn to go to make use of the skills they have acquired. Thus, if at the Kamuzu Academy they were being taught all about Sunday barbecues, swimming pools, table etiquette, the classics, suits, ties, horse riding and straw hats (or how to be the complete gentleman or lady *à l'anglaise*), this was to purge them of that presumed backwardness that has qualified Africa to be termed "the heart of darkness" (Conrad [1899]1995), and Africans as people desperately in need of salvation from a *mission civilisatrice* (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997b; Magubane 2004; Schipper 1990a&b).

It is hard to imagine African students, who have gone through all these stages of westernisation, returning home voluntarily to bear the misery and poverty of un- or underemployment with a stiff upper lip, however English they have become. Brain drain has been an inevitable consequence, even if not every brain drain has been a brain down the drain. As Mamdani observes, in its craving for centres of learning and research of international standing, Africa has produced researchers and educators with "little capacity to work in surrounding communities but who could move to any institution in any industrialised country, and serve any privileged community around the globe with comparative ease". The failure by educational systems in Africa to contextualise standards and excellence to the needs and conditions of Africans has resulted in an intelligentsia with little stamina for the very process of development whose vanguard they claim to be (Mamdani 1993:15). A situation compounded by the commercialisation of higher education, heralded by the World Bank and its neo-liberal market logic (Mamdani 2007). A streamlined or McDonaldised educational system is too standardised, uniformised, technicised, depoliticised and detached to be in tune with the predicaments of ordinary and marginal Africans thirsty and hungry for recognition, representation and upliftment (Zeleva and Olukoshi 2004; Mama 2007). Little wonder that the expectations of modernity and development pursuits sanctioned by this elite are little different (Amin 1980, 2006, 2010; Ferguson 1990, 1999, 2006).

The quest for western academic symbols of credentialism – sometimes termed *diplomania* (Robinson 1981:176-192) – and veneration of qualifications obtained abroad have characterised postcolonial Africa. Instead of seeking autonomous creative social reproduction through education

- not easy to come by in any case (Bourdieu 1996:1-6) -, African elites are still very much dependent on ill-adapted colonial curricula, sources and types of knowledge that alienate and enslave, all in the name of modernity. Sometimes it does not matter whether or not school libraries are empty, because a full library may well be of little relevance to the pressing problems and specificities of the continent. Education for Africans has, in the main, tended to be an exercise in self-evacuation and devaluation of all that took pre-colonial generations wisdom, cultural creativity and sweat to realise. The fact that Africans have placed and continue to place a very high premium on getting educated in the west or in local variants and franchises of European and North American institutions has only compounded the problem.

In South Africa for example, despite numerous local universities and a relatively long history of university education, a doctorate from Britain or the United States of America is still valued higher than anything obtained locally. Like other Africans, South Africans instinctively ask one another or others: "Where did you do your degree?" Depending on the university you name, you could be treated as a superior, an equal or an inferior by a fellow academic. Some Africans would rather graduate from Oxford, Harvard or the Sorbonne, even if this means changing their specialisations to accommodate the limited academic menu offered in these heavyweight western universities. Africans continue to flood Europe and North America to research aspects of their own countries, mostly for the prestige and status that studying abroad brings, only to end up as "disillusioned" (Nyamnjoh 2007) and "incomplete" Africans. Parents continue to send their children to Europe, North America and elsewhere for education, with the conviction that a degree even from a commercialised and second-rate western university is worth a lot more opportunities than one from a purportedly top university in Africa, unless such African universities are those generally perceived to be western universities in Africa, such as some in South Africa. Could this extraversion and xenophilia in matters educational explain the inability to radically transform curricula even when their irrelevance is widely recognised? Could this also explain the often ludicrous obsession with maintaining without problematising inherited "standards"?

### **Epistemological Xenophilia and Knowledge Dependency**

The extraverted nature of African education in general has favoured the knowledge industry of Europe and North America tremendously. It has allowed their intellectual traditions and practitioners to write themselves into the past, present and future of Africa as civilisers, saviours, initiators, mentors, and arbiters (Fonlon 1967; Chinweizu 1987; Mudimbe 1988; Schipper 1990a&b; Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1977; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997a; Crossman and Devisch 1999, 2002; Mbembe 2000a:7-40; 2001:1-23; Magubane 2004). Europe and North America have for decades dominated the rest of the world with their academic products and canons of knowledge production and consumption (Gareau 1987; Ake 1979; Zeleza 1997; Quijano 2000; Canagarajah 2002; Connell 2007; Nyamnjoh 2004b; Mama 2007).

In the social sciences and humanities, under which most of African studies falls, the west has been consistently more advanced and expansionist than underdeveloped and dependent regions of the world. In the late 1980s, Frederick Gareau (1987:599) remarked that American social science, in its "unrelenting one-way traffic", was able to penetrate countries with cultures as different from its own as those of France, Canada, India, Japan and the Republic of Korea. This penetration has given American social science a "privileged position" with "a very favourable export balance of communications" or "talking without listening".

Not only is there little importation, American social scientists ensure that "incoming messages are in accord with American socio-cultural norms". This approach and practice to scholarship not only demonstrates American power to define and determine the knowledge systems of the world. It also "betrays an ethnocentric, inward-looking fixation", with little preference for anything foreign: "if foreign, a preference for the Anglo-Saxon world; little concern for Continental Europe, and indifference or hostility towards the Second and the Third Worlds" (Gareau 1987:598-9). In another study focusing on International Relations, Kim Richard Nossal (1998:12) reached similar conclusions. Nossal notes that textbooks in this area "portray the world to their readers from a uniquely *American* point of view: they are reviewed by Americans; the sources they cite are American; the examples are American; the theory is American; the experience is American; the focus is American; and in ... [some cases], the voice is also explicitly American". Similar "single story" <sup>5</sup>observations could be made of almost every other discipline. Despite

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<sup>5</sup> See Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The dangers of a single story", July 2009, [www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html)

proclaimed independence, dependency reigns, much to the detriment of interdependence (Connell 2007).

In this context, perspectives sympathetic with the predicaments of Africa have suffered a great rejection rate by university curricula, reviewers for publishers, and academic peers who stick to their conceptual and methodological spots however compelling arguments to the contrary (Ake 1979; Nyamnjoh 2004b). Given that recognition as knowledge is very much a function of the power to define and prescribe (Bourdieu 2004:18-21), European and North American scholars are only too aware that they can ignore with impunity what is done in peripheral sites like the African continent, while any African scholar who similarly ignores western scholarship puts his or her professional competence at issue (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:27). Little wonder therefore that disciplinary debates even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be so uneven across geographies and among various racial and social categories. The advent of the internet and its purported equalising potential for the developing world does not seem to be achieving much in *significantly* redefining unequal flows of information and cultural products between the west and the rest, the internet's remarkable impact and opportunities notwithstanding. Cultural creativity and innovation made possible by accelerated mobility under globalisation are both liberating and confining, with "no absolute winners and losers" as the cultural field continues to be an uneven playing field (Hall 2010).

In Africa, intellectual dependence is further exacerbated by lack of resources for research, and the fact that even the available resources can be wasted, underused, or badly used. And without serious investments in research, western informed curricula is recycled, and teaching and learning remain void of African perspectives and ignorant of in depth understandings of African realities. African scholars are doomed to consume not books and research output of their own production or choice, but what their affluent and better placed counterparts in North America and Europe produce and enforce. Cooperation takes the form of North American and European universities calling the tune for the African pipers they have paid. Collaborative research has often worked in the interest of European and North American partners who, armed with assumed theoretical sophistication and economic resources, often reduce their African collaborators to data collectors, research assistants (Amadiume 1997:183-198) and token citations or inclusion in course syllabuses (Nnaemeka 2005:55). The tendency remains to relate to scholars from "more marginal regions of the world" as if they were "simply producers of data for the theory mills of the North" (Appadurai 2001:5).

African Studies is no exception, as Africanists appear as gatekeepers and Africans as gatecrashers (Mkandawire 1997; Berger 1997; Zeleza 1997; Prah 1998; Mama 2007). With the leading journals and publishers based in Europe and North America and controlled by academics there, African debates and perspectives find it very difficult getting fair and adequate representation. When manuscripts by Africans are not simply dismissed for being “uninformed by current debates and related literature”, they may be turned down for challenging conventional scholarly wisdom and traditional scholarly assumptions about their continent (Cabral et al. 1998; Mkandawire 1997). African academics who succeed in penetrating such gate-keeping mechanisms have often done so by making serious sacrifices in terms of the perspectives, methodologies and contextual relevance of their publications and scholarship (Prah 1998:27-31). Fela Kuti had the courage to make his music popularly relevant. Steve Biko courageously stuck to writing what he liked in an audacious quest for “self-actualization” and “a radical refusal to be a willing accomplice” in his own oppression (Mngxitama et al. 2008b:1-20; Malusi and Mphumlwana 1996; Pityana et al. 1991; Mngxitama et al. 2008a). Unlike both, many an African scholar has had to conform rather than lose internationally mediated visibility by daring to defend what Achille Mbembe (2000b) has provocatively termed “African modes of self-writing”, even at the risk of appearing like Ocol and Clementine in Song of Lawino, belittled and belittling in their xenophilia (p’Bitek 1989). The situation is hardly facilitated by the infighting amongst senior and well connected scholars, who indulge in backstabbing, delight in frustrating others and using them as stepping stones. It is common for academism to pave the way to political activism, not necessarily to advance knowledge but rather to fan the flames of ambitions of dominance outside the academy.

Migrating to the west might bring desired international recognition and exhibition as “Hottentot Venus of the Academy”, but often does not help, and could indeed exacerbate the problem of the irrelevance of the knowledge produced and consumed. The tendency is for African scholars in the diaspora to shop “up” for northern sources, not “down” for local scholarship. Little wonder therefore, that the most prominent voices in African studies are “diasporic intellectuals” whose “inspiration comes perhaps more from nicely subtle readings of fashionable European theorists” than from “current local knowledge of the cultural politics of everyday life in the postcolonial hinterlands” (Werbner 1996:6). And little wonder that the study of Africa continues to be dominated by perspectives that privilege analogies to the west over the historical processes that should qualify Africa as a unit of analysis on its own terms (Mamdani, 1996:12-13; Imam

1997; Amadiume 1997; Nnaemeka 2005; Oyewumi 2005; Mama 2007). Even when a project is meant to study endogenous knowledge systems in Africa, the tendency is for the African researchers involved to start by drawing on “theorists” elsewhere whose relevance can at best be indirect, as the empirical realities that shaped their theorising were everything but African. The suggestion to study and understand Africa first on its own terms is easily and uncritically dismissed as an invitation to celebrate African essentialism and exceptionalism. There is little patience with anything African, even by Africans. There is little discourse on Africa for Africa’s sake, and the west has often used Africa as a pretext for its own subjectivities, fantasies and perversions. And no amount of new knowledge seems challenging enough to bury for good the ghost of simplistic assumptions about Africa (Mbembe 2000a:10-21, 2001:3-9; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997b:236-322; Schipper 1990a&b; Magubane 2004; Nnaemeka 2005; Oyewumi 2005; Mama 2007).

Given its remarkable ability to reproduce and market itself globally, the colonial and colonising epistemology has emptied academia of the power and impact of competing and complementary systems of knowledge (Mudimbe 1988:x-xi). “Even in the most explicitly ‘Afrocentric’ descriptions, models of analysis explicitly or implicitly, knowingly or unknowingly, refer” to “categories and conceptual systems which depend on a western epistemological order”, as if African beliefs and African endogenous systems of thought are “unthinkable and cannot be made explicit within the framework of their own rationality” or “epistemological locus” (Mudimbe 1988:x). Although research on and in Africa has shaped the disciplines and our convictions of a supposedly universal truth (Bates et al. 1993: xiii-xiv), the quest for such universality has meant the marginalisation of African possibilities. The outcome has been nothing short of an epistemological imperialism that has facilitated both a colonial intellectual hegemony and the silencing of Africans even in the study of Africa (Copans 1990:305-395; Ake 1979; Zeleza 1997; Obenga 2001; Nabudare 2006; Nnaemeka 2005; Oyewumi 2005; Mama 2007), making of Africans intellectual outsiders in their own land and on their own issues (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 2005).

The colonial epistemology has survived in the continent more because it suits the purposes of the agents of (neo)colonialism than because of its relevance to understanding African situations. Those who run educational programmes informed by this epistemology are seldom tolerant of challenge, stimulation, provocation and competing perspectives at any level. They protect their intellectual spots jealously, and are ready to deflate all “saboteurs” and “subversives”. They want their programmes to go on without disturbance. They select as trainers and lecturers or accept,



engage and sponsor only research and scholarship that confirm their basic assumptions and convictions. But African universities, academics and researchers have the responsibility to challenge such unfounded assumptions based on vested interests, hidden agendas or the *habitus* of colonial hierarchies of humanity and human agency.

### **Providing for Popular Epistemologies**

Most accounts of African cultures and experiences have been generated from the insensitive position of power and quest for convergence and homogeneity. Explicit or implicit in these accounts is the assumption that African societies should reproduce colonial institutions and European ideals regardless of feasibility or contextual differences. Few researchers of Africa, even in African universities, have questioned enough the theories, concepts and basic assumptions informed by the dominant epistemology. The tendency has been to conform to a world conceived without them (Chinweizu 1987; Mafeje 1998:26-29). Missing are perspectives of silent majorities with vibrant but untold stories. The dominant epistemology is thus deprived. It is littered with defective accounts of voiceless communities recounted by others in texts without contexts.

Legitimately and meaningfully enlivening accounts of Africa entails paying more attention to the popular epistemologies from which ordinary people draw on a daily basis, and the ways they situate themselves in relationship to others within these epistemologies. Considering and treating the everyday life of social spaces as bona fide research sites entails, inter alia, taking the popular, the historical and the ethnographic seriously, and emphasising interdependence and conviviality. It also means encouraging “a meaningful dialogue” between these epistemologies and “modern science”, both in their old and new forms (Devisch 2002, 2007; Ramose 2003, 2004, 2010; Jansen 2011: 31-153). However, because the popular epistemologies in question have been actively discouraged and delegitimized since the colonial encounters, there is need to revalorise them and the supposedly silent majorities shaping and sharing them. To avoid the limitations of blanket assumptions, there is need for systematic and critical non-prescriptive research into these silent epistemologies of unheard majorities.

Epistemological recognition and conviviality entail moving from assumptions to empirical substantiation of claims about Africa. Hence the importance of questions such as: Who are these ordinary people? What do they do for their living? What is the nature of their epistemologies? Where do Africans, brought up under and practising the colonial epistemology, position themselves? How ready is the elite to be led by the silent majorities, further silenced with elitist

discourses? Until the elite know what these epistemologies *actually are*, they wouldn't know where and how, or with whom to dialogue. The angel may well be in the belly of the beast, just as the beast may well be in the belly of the angel.

Domestication as a dialogical epistemological shift can only begin to take shape if research by Africans critical of conventional wisdom in academia is greeted with recognition rather than censorship, caricature or derision (Obenga 2001:49-66). Only by creating space for African scholarship based on Africa as a unit of analysis in its own right could scholars begin to correct prevalent situations whereby much is known of what African states, societies, economies and individuals "*are not*" but very little of what "*they actually are*" (Mbembe 2000a:21, 2001:9). Accepting the research agendas of African scholars may not just be "a matter of ecumenism or goodwill", but also the beginnings of conversations that could enrich and enliven scholarship globally (Appadurai 1999:235-237). Forging such mutuality, in a spirit of partnership and interdependence, would help re-energise African scholars and allow for building genuinely international and democratic communities of researchers.

Global conversations and cooperation among universities and scholars are a starting point in a long journey of equalisation and recognition of marginalised epistemologies and dimensions of scientific inquiry. But any global restructuring of power relations in scholarship can only begin to be meaningful to ordinary Africans through educational institutions and curricula and pedagogies in touch and in tune with their predicaments. In this connection, academics and researchers from and on Africa cannot afford to be blind to the plight of African scholarship whatever the pressures they face and regardless of their own levels of misery and need for sustenance. Nearly three decades ago Fonlon (1978) made a plea for African universities as spaces for genuine intellectuals dedicated to the common weal. For African universities and researchers to contribute towards a genuine, multifaceted liberation of the continent and its peoples, they ought to start by joining their people in a careful rethinking of African concerns and priorities, and educational approaches (Copans 1990, 1993; Zeleza and Olukoshi 2004; Mama 2007; Ramose 2003, 2004, 2010).

The need to rethink and endogenise remains the clarion call (Mama and Hamilton 2003:35), with Mamdani (1993:19) asking for the rooting of African universities in African soil, and Mafeje (1988:8) for a move away from "received theory or contrived universalism", to "intimate knowledge of the dynamics of African culture[s] in ... contemporary setting[s]". Such "endogenisation", Crossman argues, cannot take place within the colonial model of education,

and therefore “should not only imply a freedom from dominant narratives and their methodologies but also the capacity for original and critical intellectual production by means of relatively autonomous research and educational institutions, methodologies, perspectives and choice of subject matter” (Crossman 2004:323-324; see also Crossman and Devisch 2002; Okere et al. 2005).

As with popular epistemologies, the way forward is to encourage carefully thought through research, which from inception brings out endogenous African methodologies and perspectives. And one cannot assume methodologies and perspectives are African simply because those doing the research and the thinking *proclaim* themselves African or *look* African. As Obioma Nnaemeka (2005:57) argues, “insiders can also be alienated from their own culture”, and “A Western-educated African who teaches African culture also speaks from a position of alienation which may not necessarily be as profound as that of the outsider.”

Hope for the future of education in Africa depends on providing for the creative processes of cultural endogenisation popular with ordinary Africans even as African scholars continue to cooperate and converse with intellectuals around the world. For scholars and writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong’o (2005) not to be “intellectual outsiders” in their own universities, insightful scrutiny of current curricula is needed. What are the origins? What assumptions underlie the content? What practicability and outcome? Through greater reconnection with and adaptation to local and national socio-cultural contexts, African universities might overcome functional and philosophical difficulties and make themselves more relevant to the needs of the countries and communities of peoples they serve (Crossman and Devisch 1999, 2002; Crossman 2004; Zeleza and Olukoshi 2004a; Olukoshi and Zeleza 2004b; Devisch 2007; Mama 2007). Initiatives for reconnecting universities to lived life and embedding research in African communities should be encouraged.

The possibility of such work is evidenced by research and/or critical thinking – ranging from the “Afrocentrism” of scholars such as Moliye Kete Asante (2003) and Marimba Ani (1994), to Dani Wadaba Nabudare’s (2006) “Afrokology”, through philosophy (Appiah 1992; Eze 1997; Hountondji 2002), popular culture (Barber 1997; Edman 2010), history, legal and political processes (Ake 1979, 2000; Amadiume 1987; Mamdani 1996; Falola and Jennings 2002; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006), and gender relations and identities (Imam et al 1997; Amadiume 1987, 1997; Nnaemeka 2005; Oyewumi 2005; Mama 2007). What is needed however is not so much pointing to isolated individuals perceived to be doing “ the right thing”, but a critical mass of scholars

and non-scholars networking and working together strategically towards achieving the valorisation of marginalised humanity and the creative diversity of being African. In the quest to re-anchor and endogenise education in and about Africa, through the critical rethinking of curriculum, the work of Paulus Gerdes of Mozambique calling for cross-disciplinary conversations and joint initiatives between natural and social scientists is instructive. Gerdes (1999, 2007, 2008; Djebbar and Gerdes 2007) has researched and published on mathematics, geometry and logic long practised by “ordinary” Africans in productive and decorative activities like mat and basket weaving, ceramics and sculpting, and in riddles and storytelling, and often illustrated by design patterns drawn on the ground and reflected in infinitely complex and varied dance steps, drum rhythms and melodies. Equally instructive is research into endogenous notions of time and calendars, ecological knowledge, farming, fishing and pastoral techniques, taxonomic knowledge in fauna and flora, pharmacopoeias and medical aetiologies, and diverse traditions of healthcare.

This encouraging evidence shows that Africa can be party in a global conversation on knowledge making on its own epistemological and methodological terms, with the interests and concerns of ordinary Africans carefully negotiated, navigated and blended with those of the elite, in the African tradition of accommodation and appropriation. Popular epistemologies and methodologies, systematically researched and consolidated into publicly accessible repertoires, can provide inspiration and understanding for scholarly and popular endeavours. There is need for the systematic integration of conflicting and complementary epistemologies, and space for scholarship and perspectives of all persuasions. Epistemological conviviality and interconnection are possible precisely in light of the spirit of tolerance for which Africans are renowned, and in recognition that there are no final answers to perplexing questions in a dynamic world. Elite and non-elite in Africa, like elsewhere, are all variants of John Godfrey’s six blind men, desperately seeking to fathom the elephant. This is not to say sighted the blind would necessarily *know* the elephant, for reality is much more than meets the eye.

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