

Postcolonial Studies: An Avenue to Examining Africa's Indigenous Knowledge Systems

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Abstract

This opinion-centered essay underscores the postcolonial commitment to the recovery of the traditional knowledge systems invalidated for centuries by Europe and America's essentialist paradigms, and strives to open up new avenues for postcolonial studies in Africa, specifically in areas where western categories have failed to provide appropriate responses to postcolonial problematics. The study then demonstrates with specific examples derived from Africa's refined traditions that the transculturality, transnationality, and transdisciplinarity of postcolonial studies constitute genuine assets for Africa to achieve its cultural and linguistic revitalization through the recovery of its indigenous languages and cultures and the retrieval of untapped knowledges in such crucial areas as traditional pharmacopeia, environmental wisdom, food production, conflict-resolution, and conviviality social dynamics.

Introduction

If postcolonial theorists have strongly been committed to the deconstruction of the essentialist and foundational discourses delivered by the West to better subjugate non-Western worlds, this commitment, to a large extent, accounts for the good aura of postcolonial studies in many educational and research institutions in the last decade. Still, postcolonial criticism would presumably have failed to prove so engaging, had the restoration of indigenous knowledges invalidated for centuries by European epistemologies not been included in its agenda. That epistemological recovery is naturally twinned with the calling into question of normative categories meant to accentuate the divide between the institutionalized academic data produced in the North on one side, and the traditional knowledge systems of the South on the other side. This study explores compelling avenues open to postcolonial communities across disciplines, ethnicities and nationalities, for the retrieval of their untapped knowledge systems and their contribution to global scientific data.

African Orality and Postcolonial Commitment

Without ever denying white supremacist institutions their right to build histories for the expansion of what he calls their human consciousness and the preservation of their interests, Na'im Akbar, in *Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery* (1996), describes the strategy that has led to European-American control and influence over the world:

"[...] the story about European accomplishments and the description of European culture and structuring the world's reality around European experiences are essential parts of building the European consciousness to ensure its survival and maintain the freedom of European people" (Akbar, 34).

Even though Akbar's perspective remains that of an African-American psychologist accounting for the combination, in the psyche of the sons and daughters of former enslaved people, of multiple traumas including the loss of human consciousness and the disruption of their sense of community, European colonialism used almost the same subjugation mechanisms which resulted in the psychological and moral servitude of colonial subjects. Hence, the reorientation of African history must take into consideration some important steps in the process Akbar has showcased for the restoration of human consciousness to the children of African-American families. Put differently, the new generations of African people in Africa, like the African diaspora in the United States, need to be taught *"our heroes and heroines, our discoverers, scientists, artists, teachers, inventors, and as much the greatness of African accomplishments as Europeans are taught about the greatness of European accomplishments"* (Akbar 35).

Akbar's restoration project, as he most wisely elaborates on it, does not exclude the knowledge of European-American histories since the latter help African-Americans know their own defeats in order to design better strategies that could help meet the historical challenges ahead. However, if, for the liberation of Black people, Akbar has opted for the same strategies utilized by the owner of the enslaved which, to some extent, refashion the notion of mimicry theorized by Homi Bhabha, African populations in Africa, in many historical contexts, had to rely on their own knowledge systems to overthrow Western colonization.

In *Kirikou and the Sorceress* (1998), an African animation movie written and directed by Michel Ocelot, the respectable elder featured as the repository of the group's knowledge, systematically refuses to provide young Kirikou with any talismans to fight Karaba, because these are the very weapons used by the sorceress to frighten and subjugate the villagers. Instead, the patriarch asks the young hero to check his anger and to confront the enemy with *"pure innocence, total truth, and intelligence"* (*Kirikou and the Sorceress* n.p.).

Beyond the quest for truth generally associated with Ocelot's cartoon,¹ *Kirikou* can be read through Karaba's politics of domination as an allegorical reenactment of the West's domination knowledge used during both the slave phenomena and the colonial period: delimiting a territory of her own, extorting women's gold, setting fire on the houses of people who try to protect their property, using middlemen (fetishes) to accomplish her destructive plans, and finally arousing fear in people's minds. The well-known process of "thingification" of enslaved and colonized people comes to mind, as many of them had been denied material property or family ties, let alone any forms of knowledge. In actual fact, the revocation, at the end of the movie, of the Western Manichaeism regarding the notions of good and evil, and the accomplishment of the unification of the two antagonistic forces (Kirikou-sorceress) underscores, in some way, the hybridization process at the heart of postcolonial theory while repudiating the destructive ethnic, linguistic, geographical, and religious boundaries strategically imposed on African populations by the European colonizer.

From another perspective, the capacity of the villagers to thwart by all means the colonial stratagems intended to maintain Western hegemony (Kirikou bores a hole in the dugout and fells the tree that carries the children to the sorceress's abode) emblemizes the African resistance to centuries of colonial and imperialist dominance that constitutes, as well, a necessary prerequisite to the atmosphere of concord and harmony in the final scene which portrays Kirikou having already tamed the sorceress while the crowd of the young people the latter had abducted during her reign flows into the village amidst songs and dances. If the mystic and emotional healing of Karaba has, in the same process, entailed the physical healing of the whole village (drinkable water now flows from the spring), it has also engendered the objective conditions for the emergence of a reconciliation dynamics customarily created by pre-colonial African communities in situations of conflict. Viewed through the lens of postcolonial criticism, the return of the venerated patriarch into the village after years of dreadful coercion brings to light not only the tale's lessons of wisdom and tolerance from which all human communities can gain substantial benefits, but it also emphasizes, at the same time, the immense potentialities in the recovery of traditional knowledges by postcolonial societies. Indeed, the task of excavating indigenous knowledges wrapped in the folds of African folktales and other oral genres lies at the heart of postcolonial studies.

Against the backdrop of thriving cultures and economies in non-Western countries, a decisive shift of conceptualizations for postcolonial analysis remains of paramount importance, in correlation with the rethinking of the economic paradigms brought about by the new global economy which imposes its diktat on poor economies. In this respect, the subaltern knowledges relating to history, languages, philosophy, and environmental wisdom that had totally been obscured by Western metanarratives must be made visible. It follows that no postcolonial society, no matter what indigenous or foreign language it utilizes, can reconstruct its national or ethnic histories in a vacuum.

Because colonial and imperialist discourses always regenerate under different forms, postcolonial societies, to paraphrase Achille Mbembe, shall either find ways to save themselves or sink on their own. In other words, African communities must today design their own strategies to rehabilitate their untapped traditional knowledges in the areas of agriculture, conflict resolutions, religious tolerance, and the preservation of natural resources as viable alternatives to the domineering Western epistemologies.

As a result, the devastating impacts of Western knowledge politics on African indigenous cultures poses, for postcolonial societies, the significant challenge of recapturing national or ethnic histories either revealed or systematically concealed in the margins of both published and unpublished texts. In fact, there remain meaningful silences in texts produced by African people during colonization or even in the post-independence period. First, the complex political and economic networks characteristic of colonial rule did not always allow colonial subjects to give objective accounts for their actual national, ethnic or personal histories. For example, a postcolonial reading of novels like *Force Bonté* (1926) by Bakary Diallo or *Les trois volontés de Malic* (1920) by Ahmadou Mapaté Diagne (both novels were written by colonial subjects) could disclose authorial silences pregnant with sociological, cultural or political meanings, especially if we contrapuntally analyze those literary pieces from the perspectives of both colonizer and colonized, following Edward Said's theorization on colonial texts. Second, owing to some linguistic, economic or social impediments, many pieces of African orature have never been written in neither exoglossic nor endoglossic African languages.

Like a sword of Damocles, the lack of incentives to write in indigenous languages constitutes, in the wake of the overwhelming communication technologies, a serious threat to the intergenerational transfer of African literary assets, whether oral or written. In this regard, Michel Ocelot's adaptation, examined above, of a West African tale into an instructive screenplay has set a path-breaking example for postcolonial cinematography, filmmakers, and writers.

Africa's Traditional Wisdom in a Global World

For postcolonial theorists, the "learning to learn from below" approach which Gayatri C. Spivak has refashioned from the Subaltern Studies Group proves all the more crucial since it interrogates the "universality" of West-grown knowledges imposed on postcolonial populations, in addition to the fact that the conditions of validating and channeling those knowledges in any number of fields have also remained west-centered. As a consequence, the emergence of a balanced and unbiased knowledge politics in the world is contingent upon the excavation and adaptation of Africa's untapped knowledges on all sectors of social life to the new context of global economies.

In her keynote address at the University of California in San Barbara,² Spivak shares an instructive experience she once witnessed in South Africa with traditional healers resorting to their ethnic knowledge in order to cure endemic diseases, and even make accurate weather forecasts.³ The same preoccupation reverberates through Homi Bhabha's postcolonial engagement and his theory of transitional justice which he illustrates through the Gacaca courts in Rwanda after the 1994 genocide (this collective healing recalls the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in South Africa after Mandela came to power in 1994). According to Bhabha, the traditional conflict-resolution processes that brought face to face the genocidal maniacs and some of their victims in Rwanda exemplify the "necessary collaboration between ethics, aesthetics and postcolonial activism."⁴

With a similar outlook, but under dissimilar forms, the social dynamics that help achieve peaceful cohabitation (which Anthony K. Appiah calls *ethnic eclecticism*) among the variety of ethnic groups in a number of postcolonial societies constitute traditional resources to be unearthed and rehabilitated in a systematic manner. The type of cousinship among three ethnic groups in Senegal (Seereer, Fulani, and Joola)⁵ can be perceived as part of the powerful solidarity networks invented by African people so as to counter the thralls of the European slave phenomena, and colonialism.

Likewise, other African communities have succeeded in tearing down a lot of artificial barriers erected by the colonizer by imagining various forms of convivial knowledge leading to valuable ethnic connections and religious tolerance. A strong sense of mutual respect has, for instance, engendered the rationale and convergent principles behind the construction of mixed cemeteries in the Senegalese cities of Joal-Fadiouth (the birthplace of the poet and political leader Léopold Sédar Senghor) and in the Santhiaba District of Ziguinchor where both Muslim and Christian communities bury their dead. Furthermore, the well-known friendship between the late Archbishop Yacinthe Thiandoum (wherein his Muslim cousin was an *Imam* or prayer leader in their village mosque) of the Archdiocese of Dakar and the Omar Foutiyou Tall Sufi brotherhood in Senegal represents an example of constructive interreligious dialogue that has cemented mutual acceptance in many African areas, to the extent that today's ethnic and religious strife in Nigeria and in other areas remains an exception to the general rule of harmonious cohabitation among African communities.⁶

Again, despite the sporadic use, in some Wolof communities, of the term *ñakk* (castigated by Senegalese novelist Mariama Bâ in *So Long a Letter* (1980), because *ñakk* literally means "thorn-branch fence," which suggests images of exclusiveness or non-belongingness) to designate the other African nationalities living in Senegal (an attitude reminiscent of Robert C. Young's theory about the colonial strategy of "othering the other"), there exist joking relationships among Wolof, Fulani, Joola, and Seereer families based on either their ethnic customs or their patronyms.

Such quasi-ritual social institution enables almost any member of these groups to build solid ties with their neighbors through convivial and gentle jokes over their family names, social behaviors or eating habits. And these feigned antagonisms generally oppose people irrespective of gender, age, or social status, and in Senegal, joking relationships often function according to the following patterns: Joop-Njaay, Seesay-Tureh, Ngom-Seen or Juuf-Fay (all family names in Senegal). Clearly, this bantering tradition reinforcing both interethnic and intra-ethnic interactions remains tied to the urge for an open-hearted dialogue among people who have never met before; in fact, this custom fosters solid social bonds and a sense of belongingness within and outside each of the ethnic communities involved in this type of relationship. In an essay entitled: “Bozo-Dogon Bantering: Policing Access to Djenne’s Building Trade with Jests and Spells” (2003) Trevor H.J. Marchand examines similar interethnic traditional relationships in Mali, although the Bozo-Dogon joking tradition focuses more specifically on professional behaviors.⁷

Other refined forms of indigenous knowledge systems could be found in traditional farming, plant medicine, food conservation, fuel management, child-rearing, etc. For instance, before the colonial imposition on Africa of cash crops like peanuts (Senegal), cocoa (Ivory Coast), timber (Republic of Congo), cotton (Mali), African populations used to rely on local food production and ecological land management, allowing for the regeneration of soils, like the three-year crop rotation practiced by Seereer populations in pre-colonial Senegal. Because cash crops have undermined sustainable agriculture and brought wretchedness to Africa as demonstrated by Evaggelos Vallianatos, author of *The Land is their Land: How Corporate Farms Threaten the World* (2006),⁸ local communities should be encouraged to reverse the colonial trend, and retrieve the traditional food self-sufficiency knowledges that European colonialism systematically invalidated. Noticeably, colonial cash-cropping has contributed to the destruction of the natural environment while endangering, in the same process, the intergenerational transfer of traditional knowledge, more specifically in the area of herbalism and plant medicine.

Furthermore, the urge for sustainable management of the environment and the practice of energy efficiency and conservation has given birth to postcolonial ecocriticism which aims to critique the marginalization of postcolonial societies in Western mainstream ecocriticism by offering a clear vision of “*resource imperialism inflicted on the global South to maintain the unsustainable consumer appetites of rich-country citizens and, increasingly, of the urban middle classes in the global South itself*” (Nixon 22). In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) Rob Nixon opens his introduction with the postcolonial challenge posed by Lawrence Summers, an American chief economist who worked at the World Bank between 1991 and 1993. In Summers’s scenario, the dirty industries in rich countries which produce toxic waste should be exported to Africa because that area is under-polluted.

In the face of such imperialist politics which posits that African countries are “*discounted as cultures possessing environmental practices and concerns of their own*” (Nixon, 2), added to the persistent scramble for the continent’s natural resources, postcolonial ecocriticism strives to design counter-epistemologies and counter-strategies capable of mitigating the enormous toll global multinationals have exacted on the continent’s local ecosystems. And across academic disciplines, ethnicities, and national identities, postcolonial ecocriticism recaptures indigenous solutions for rehabilitating Africa’s rainforests, wildlife, natural habitats, and agricultural lands that have been ravaged by Western companies.

Hence, this academic endeavor underscores some reflection on “*unearthing tenacious traditions of environmental thought*” (Nixon, p.xii) twinned with ecological actions for alleviating the devastating effects of climate change on Africa.⁹ Many environmental studies having indicated that the trend of environmental degradation is reversible provided that governments immediately start implementing new policies (consisting, among other measures, in stopping the processes of deforestation while addressing the threats to wildlife and overfishing)¹⁰ focused on renewable energy sources, thus, Africa’s strategic positioning regarding that energy crisis remains central as the smartest solutions seem to be solar and wind energies. Also, since environmentalists have seemingly agreed on the conclusion that a small portion of the Sahara desert could supply the entire world with electricity, a key prospect for postcolonial ecocriticism remains the commitment to carving out avenues whereby African populations could confront the “second scramble for Africa” ahead by making sure that last century’s Euro-centric epistemologies and imperialist politics are not reenacted to the detriment of grass-root populations.

Given that climate change and global warming are no subjects for speculation today, African postcolonial societies must not only envisage the shift from fossil fuels to sun and wind energies that nature has generously bestowed upon the continent, but they must also imagine responses driven by total truth and intelligence (as in Ocelot’s tale) to the scientific evidence that both Western and non-Western worlds will inevitably engage in a new competition for the same sources of energy. In view of this specific energetic and environmental issue, it appears obvious that the political, cultural, and disciplinary compartmentalization of African nations because of foreign epistemologies (francophone countries, commonwealth nations, underdeveloped world, among many others) is liable to jeopardize postcolonial prospects for transnational or continental strategies.

Postcolonialism, as illustrated by the channels of enquiry mentioned above, can build solid knowledge structures on the intersections between postcolonial critique and many other academic disciplines by exploring areas where traditional knowledges could help postcolonial societies grow medically, culturally, and economically self-reliant.

No doubt, European colonialism has adversely affected all areas of African existence, which implies that transdisciplinarity shall become one of the distinctive features of postcolonial studies in Africa, as African postcolonialists deploy more efforts to forge new epistemologies derived from African untapped indigenous wisdom.

Without any pretention to cover the whole array of research perspectives open to postcolonialism in Africa, the crucial importance of the restoration of indigenous languages cannot be overstated given that most traditional knowledges postcolonial linguists seek to retrieve remain encoded in African languages more noticeably than in any exoglossic language. And it follows that postcolonial education systems based on colonial languages as mediums of instruction pose a Promethean challenge to postcolonial critiques insofar as the imposition of European languages associated with subjugation and the superiority of one culture over another has destructive psychological effects on its learners. Accordingly, postcolonial studies must give primacy to the spirit of the OAU Language Plan of Action by drawing on the rich experiments in indigenous language policies conducted in Tanzania (with Kiswahili and English as mediums of instruction), Kenya (with both English and Kiswahili as official languages) South Africa (with eleven official languages including nine endoglossic languages), and in many other areas of the world. Thus, the massive presence in postcolonial Africa of foreign languages which often stand as factors of division obviously reinforces Western epistemologies, and people's acculturation and linguistic dependency upon the West.

Conclusion

Western scholarship has shown little interest in the existence in Africa, before the arrival of Europeans on African coasts, traditional Gacaca courts and over two thousand varieties of indigenous grains, roots, and fruits¹¹ which ensured self-sufficiency in food production, efficient local technologies of soil regeneration, with an immense stock of oral and iconographic arts that inspire today any number of artists throughout the world, added to powerful empires that extended their wealth as far as the Middle East.

And given that Africa still hoards the potential in natural resources and human ingenuity for its own development and that of the rest of the world, despite three hundred years of colonial and imperialist disruption of its indigenous livelihoods, Robert C. Young's prediction that the twenty-first century is the century of postcolonial empowerment shall come true in Africa if it succeeds in repudiating the ideological and cultural splits engendered by European epistemologies. To this end, the recapturing of Africa's refined traditions and best practices in the areas of indigenous languages, conflict-resolution processes, ethnic medicine, storytelling, conviviality social dynamics, and ethnic environmental wisdom shall foreground the rehabilitation of the traditional knowledge systems repudiated for centuries by Western tenets.

Most presumably, the economic and cultural revitalization postcolonial communities are striving for shall be achieved neither with “borrowed money and ideas” nor with the West’s grand narratives enunciated in fetishized languages which still reflect negative images of political subjugation and linguistic dominance in the hearts and minds of African people.

Endnotes

¹ See “Kirikou and the Sorceress” by Michel Ocelot, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Odec Kid Cartoons. 1998. It is said that Michel Ocelot has adapted his movie from an African tale inspired from a collection of folktales by colonial administrator Francois Equilbeck who sojourned in Senegal and Guinea in the early 1900s. Researchers have also argued that Equilbeck himself developed many of his stories from Senegalese traditional oral arts (See an interesting movie review on *Kirikou* by Elvis Mitchell (*The New York Times* of Feb. 11, 2017) first published on Feb. 18, 2000).

² See Spivak’s keynote address at the University of California San Barbara entitled “The Subaltern and the Popular: the Trajectory of the Subaltern in my Work.”

³ The interdisciplinary project involving Gayatri C. Spivak (postcolonial theorist from India) and Souleymane Bachir Diagne (philosopher from Senegal) could be situated in the constant preoccupation with the subaltern’s agency as the two scholars aim to establish what they call *global contemporaneity* between Saint Louis of Senegal and Chandernagor in India. For more information on this issue, see Spivak’s “Postcolonialism in France,” pp. 226-229.

⁴ See Homi Bhabha’s lecture titled “A Global Measure: Writing Rights and Responsibilities” delivered at the University of California San Barbara and recorded on March 15, 2004.

⁵ It is our conviction that the kinship developed between Senegal’s Seereer and Joola ethnic groups represents a significant counter-force that has prevented the extension of the rebellion in Casamance (Southern area of Senegal). Interestingly, whenever Joola rebels capture national army soldiers defending the unity of the country in Casamance, the rebellion area, they immediately try to identify all the Seereer soldiers in order to release them. Because of that cousinship, no member of the Joola ethnic group dares intentionally shed the blood of a Seereer (and vice versa), and during all Joola traditional ceremonies, Seereer attendees are served the best food and the best places are reserved to them. Almost the same conviviality exists between Fulani and Seereer. As a consequence of that safe atmosphere, the first President of the Republic of Senegal, Léopold Sedar Senghor, remained in office for over twenty years without interruption though he was a catholic from the Seereer minority ethnic group (about 95% of Senegal’s population are Muslims).

⁶ Another inspiring example of a peaceful cohabitation between Muslims and Christians could be found in many communities in Senegal where members of the Islamic and Christian creeds work sometimes together to build either mosques or churches (for instance in Joal). In the same perspective, Senegalese people are now familiar with the endeavor of the renowned Muslim religious leader named Modou Kara Mbacké who summons his disciples each year, on the occasion of the catholic All Souls' Day, to devote many hours weeding and cleaning the catholic Saint Lazare de Bethany Cemetery in Dakar. For more information on the Islamic-Christian dialogue in Senegal, see the proceedings of the Conference on “Enracinement et ouverture III: Plaidoyer pour le dialogue interreligieux” (Religious Identity and Openness to Other Creeds: Advocacy for Interreligious Dialogue) co-sponsored by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Cheikh Anta Diop University, and the Israeli Embassy in Senegal, December 6-7, 2011. Web 29 February, 2016.

⁷ See Trevor H.J. Marchand, “Bozo-Dogon Bantering: Policing Access to Djenne’s Building Trade with Jest and Spells” in *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, published by the International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments (IASTE), University of California, Berkeley, Volume XIV, Number II, 2003, pp 47-63.

⁸ In a powerful essay entitled the “Cash-crop Colonialism and the Attack on African Agriculture” (2011), Evaggelos Vallianatos pledges for the return to indigenous plants and for abolishing the colonial tradition of cash-cropping which has resulted in African importation of rice, wheat, and maize, combined with the destruction of large areas of land for the sole benefit of Western agribusiness companies.

⁹ Environmental studies on climate change and global warming have revealed appalling consequences of climate change on Africa by showing that the continent will be affected more dramatically than any other part of the world although it contributes less to the problem. The consequences on our physical and social environment range from stronger and more frequent droughts, loss of plant species, mammals and other animal species, to increased diseases like malaria and malnutrition. For more information on this issue, see CIGI Special Report: *Climate Change in Africa: Adaptation, Mitigation and Governance Challenges* edited by Hany Besada and Nelson Sewankambo, The Centre for International Governance Innovation, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2009.

¹⁰ See among other sources *Environment and Conflicts Project* edited by Kurt R. Spillmann and Gunter Bachler, *ENCOP Occasional Papers*, Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich, Web. Feb. 12, 2017. p. 14

¹¹ The phrase “borrowed money and ideas” as well as the information on the varieties of indigenous grains, roots, and fruits are both retrieved from Evaggelos Vallianatos’s study quoted above.

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