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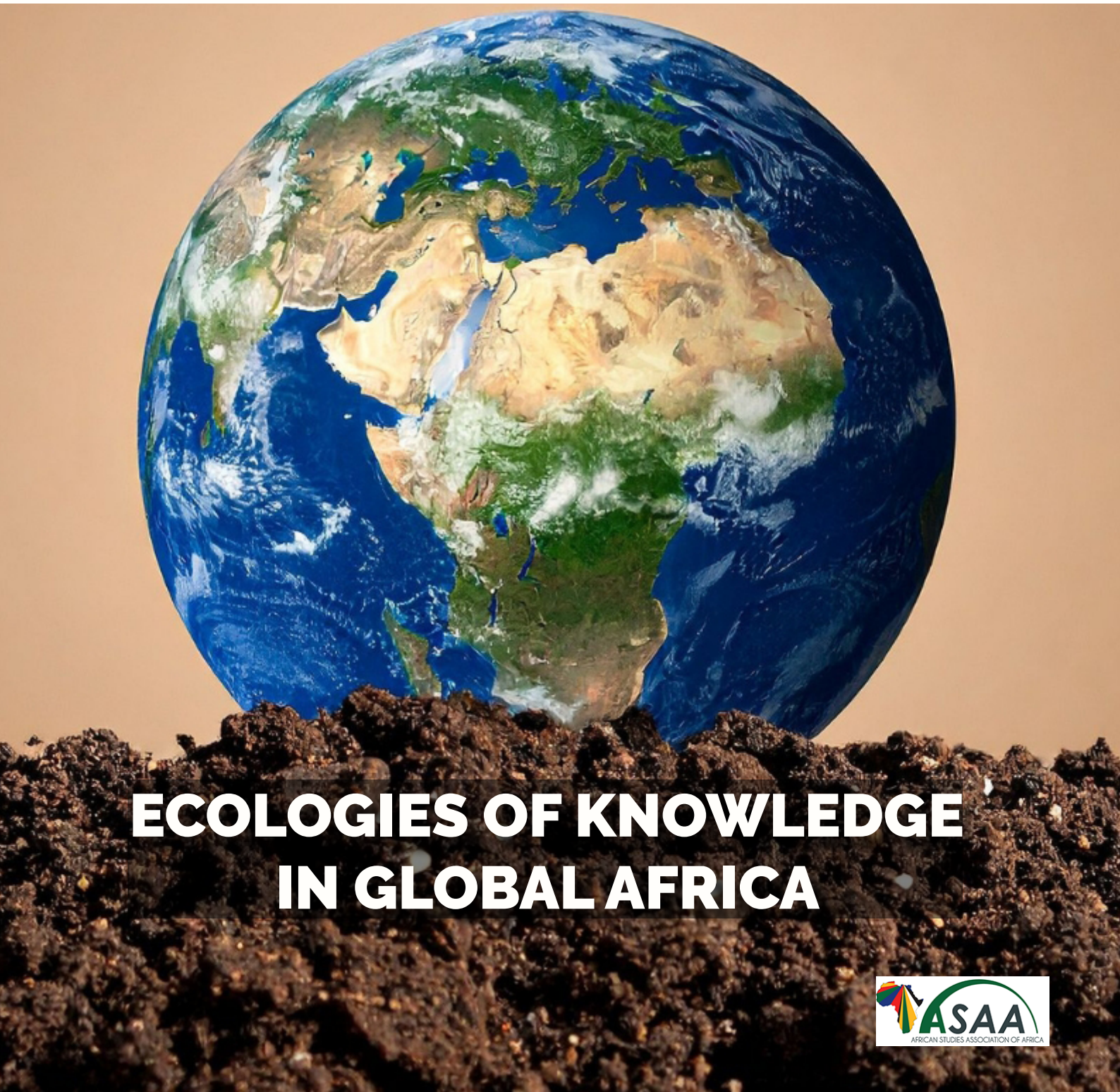

ECOLOGIES OF KNOWLEDGE IN GLOBAL AFRICA

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Editorial

This inaugural issue of *Bokutani* delves into the intricate and dynamic relationships between knowledge systems across the African continent and its diasporas. By focusing on the theme "Ecologies of Knowledge in Global Africa," we aim to explore how African knowledge traditions intersect, adapt, and respond to global contexts. This editorial sets the stage for a nuanced understanding of these interactions, emphasizing the significance of African agency in shaping knowledge landscapes.

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Bokutani is a peer-reviewed journal dedicated to advancing African-centered knowledge across disciplinary, linguistic, regional, and epistemic boundaries. Aligned with the mission of the African Studies Association of Africa (ASAA), the journal centers African epistemologies and intellectual traditions, offering a platform for dialogue, critique, and the production of knowledge that reflects the diversity and complexity of Africa and its diasporas.
We publish original research articles, theoretical essays, reflections, and reviews that critically engage with African intellectual traditions, decolonial approaches, and global conversations from Africa-centered perspectives.

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Bokutani Contributors

1. "*Knowledge Production as Discourses of Power: The Politics of Archives and the Production of Knowledge"* by **Conrad John Masabo**.

2. "*African Archives, Digital Humanities, and Decolonial Narratives: A Case Study of Archiving"* by **Olalekan Ojumu.**

3. "*The Language Policy in Senegal: Digital Opportunities, Decolonial Narratives, and African Futures"* by **Arfang Dabo and Vieux Alassane Touré.**

4. "*African Languages and the Ecologies of Knowledge in the United States' Midwestern Universities*" by **Paul Onesmus Ntinda.**

5. "*Sent by the Gods: François Duvalier's Appropriation and Performance of Divine Authority*" by **Phillip Effiong.**

6. "*From the Invisible to the Visible: Poetics of Colonial Disaster in Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade by Assia Djebar*" by **Marius Kahakeu Deffo.**

7. "*The Power of Water: A Message to the Future from Ousmane Sembène*" by **Abena Ampofoa Asare.**

8. "*Back to Africa: Epistemological Possibilities of Critical African Political Economy*" by **Titilayo Odedele.**

9. "*Kenyan Children and Youth as Keepers of Indigenous Knowledge*" by **Esther Mukewa Lisanza**

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Table of

Contents

Editorial

Bokutani—Reclaiming and Reimagining African Ecologies of Knowledge

Bokutani
The African Studies Association of Africa

From Dakar to Nairobi, Cairo to Cape Town, Ethiopia to Eswatini, a vibrant new generation of scholars, artists, and performers is rethinking what it means to know Africa and to know from Africa. Their work defies inherited boundaries of discipline and geography, insisting that African intellectual traditions are not only alive but foundational to our collective futures. It is within this spirit of renewal and reclamation that **Bokutani**, the journal of the African Studies Association of Africa (ASAA), is born.

As the journal of the premier African Studies association based on the continent, *Bokutani* stands as both an epistemic stance and an invitation: to center African voices, nurture pluriversal knowledges, and imagine scholarship that transforms as it informs. Continuing the mission of African Studies, the journal aims to produce knowledge about the meanings, manifestations, and possible trajectories of the idea of "Africa," while engaging with knowledge production from Africa-centered locations and methods rooted in the pluriversal ethos of African cultures. In this way, *Bokutani*, like ASAA itself, is at once an epistemic position, a political intervention, and a method of analysis.

We therefore continue this tradition as we foreground African agency, challenge centuries of epistemicide, and advance a pluridisciplinary, inclusive, and participatory approach to knowledge production that questions the limits of Euro-modern disciplinarity. Following the pluriversal ethos of the griot tradition, *Bokutani* builds bridges across the humanities and beyond, underscoring the need to understand African phenomena from multiple perspectives. We call on thinkers and doers, performers and creative actors, to join us in privileging African knowledges and practices and in developing methodologies that both center Africa and remain acutely aware of power dynamics.

This inaugural issue explores the continued relevance of African Studies through three interrelated frameworks: conceptual, asking why African Studies matters today; methodological, probing how we should study Africa now and how to engage archives and knowledges long suppressed or dispersed; and thematic, considering how diverse intellectual traditions, thinkers, and doers advance our understanding of Africa. Together, these contributions affirm that African intellectual traditions are not only objects of study but also active forces shaping global conversations.

The issue opens by rethinking the very archives through which African knowledge is remembered and mobilized. Olalekan Ojumu explores how digital humanities platforms like Archivi.ng dismantle barriers to access and challenge Western ownership of African archives. Building on the insights of Afrofuturism, Digital African Humanities, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's call to "decolonise the mind," Ojumu shows that digitization is not merely preservation but an intervention in the politics of knowledge. By restoring narrative control to African communities and forging connections between historical memory and technological futures, digital archives emerge as instruments of narrative sovereignty.

Conrad John Masabo deepens this engagement by revisiting the entanglement of power and knowledge. He shows that archives are not neutral repositories but sites where power is produced and contested, asking whether decolonising the archive is even possible. By reframing the archive as a locus of the "discourse of power," Masabo highlights how the struggle for epistemic liberation is inseparable from the struggle over the very structures that claim to safeguard history.

From questions of memory and custody, the conversation turns to language as the living medium of thought and the foundation of Africa's epistemic futures. Paul Ntinda examines how African languages are positioned in Midwestern U.S. universities—often reduced to the status of "foreign" or "critical" languages—and argues that such marginalization perpetuates epistemic injustice. Through interviews and case studies, he demonstrates how universities can move beyond tokenism to center African languages as vital resources for knowledge production, dissemination, and preservation. Ntinda calls for a radical shift in institutional practice, one that treats African languages not as optional supplements but as indispensable to a more equitable global academy.

Vieux Toure traces Senegal's French-only language policy from its colonial origins through the presidencies of Léopold Sédar Senghor and Abdoulaye Wade to the present. Despite repeated calls for reform, Wolof—the Senegambian lingua franca—has yet to be fully integrated into the national school system. Toure argues that the advent of artificial intelligence offers a rare opportunity to change this trajectory. Drawing on Fallou Ngom's work on Ajami literacy and Fiona McLaughlin's analyses of language politics, he envisions AI as a digital infrastructure capable of accelerating Wolof's incorporation into formal education, reframing linguistic sovereignty for the twenty-first century.

Other contributions broaden the scope of inquiry to the political, historical, and ecological forces shaping African futures. Effiong Phillip examines how Haiti's François "Papa Doc" Duvalier appropriated and performed divine authority rooted in African religious-political traditions, particularly Vodou, to consolidate power. Duvalier's godlike persona illustrates both the enduring potency of sacred kingship and the dangers of its manipulation, offering a cautionary meditation on the intersections of spirituality and authoritarianism.

Marius Kahakeu Deffo reads Assia Djebar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* as a poetics of colonial disaster. Through geopoetics and the lens of traumatic sensory memory, he shows how Djebar weaves the Algerian conquest, the war of decolonization, and autobiographical fragments into a narrative that rethinks and redefines colonial space, making visible the often-invisible violences of empire.

Abena Ampofoa Asare turns to cinema to reveal how African art anticipates ecological crisis. Her reading of Ousmane Sembène's 1975 film *Xala* foregrounds the recurring Evian water bottle as a prophetic emblem of waste colonialism and water privatization. Fifty years on, Sembène's critique of postcolonial consumerism resonates even more urgently as West Africa grapples with the mounting dangers of plastic pollution and ecological degradation.

Complementing these analyses, Titilayo Odedele explores the epistemological possibilities of a critical African political economy that re-centers African agency in global economic thought, while Esther Lisanza highlights how Kenyan children and youth act as keepers of indigenous herbal knowledge. Lisanza's work underscores the power of intergenerational transmission in sustaining ecological wisdom, linguistic sovereignty, and decolonial futures.

Taken together, the essays in this inaugural issue embody the pluriversal ethos that animates *Bokutani*. They traverse archives and digital humanities, language policy and linguistic justice, political theology and ecological critique, showing the vitality of African intellectual traditions as sources of theory, method, and action.

Launching *Bokutani* is thus more than an academic milestone. It is a political and epistemic act: a refusal of epistemicide, a reclamation of African agency, and an affirmation that Africa is not merely a site of study but a crucible of world-making ideas. We invite scholars, artists, and activists to join us in sustaining this conversation—one that is deeply rooted and boldly future-oriented.

Bokutani begins here, but it belongs to all who dare to think, create, and struggle from Africa and with Africa, toward worlds otherwise.

Feature Articles

Knowledge Production as Discourses of Power

The Politics of Archives and the Production of Knowledge[1]

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Abstract

De-colonial turn in the politics of knowledge production, and particularly the knowledge production in Africa, still begs for the re-examination of the discourses of power and sources of knowledge production. This article revisits the power-knowledge politics debate by elucidating how archives acquire power and the politics that are involved in knowledge production using the archive. It teases out the power and politics of the archive in the context of the quest of decolonisation of knowledge production and to ask whether it is possible to decolonise the archive. In that the article provides a critique of archive not only as a site of production of historical knowledge but also as a site of the production of power in what is termed as the 'discourse of power'.

Keywords: Archive, De-colonial, Discourse, Knowledge production, Power

Introduction

The recent call to decolonize academia challenges existing parameters to gauge authenticity of knowledge, its producers and sources used in production which to a larger extent have pushed the Global South and Africa to the margins of knowledge production in the world (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020; 2018; Pillay 2024; Thondhlana & Garwe 2021). This article contributes to this unfolding debate by revisiting the knowledge-power debate (Foucault 2000; 1980). In this it examines one source of knowledge production – the archive – by elucidating how archives acquire power and the politics that are involved in knowledge production using the archive (Derrida 1998; Pell 2015). The goal is to tease out the power and politics of the archive in the context of the quest of decolonisation of knowledge production and to ask whether it is possible to decolonise the archive. This is imperative and as, Pell argues, "critical work emerging from archival and cultural studies has emphasized the archive's social and political role in ordering knowledge, establishing criteria for credibility, and anchoring claims to authority and truth" (2015: 35).

1 Parts of this article were published in an abridged version of this piece which appeared in *African Social Research* 5 (Winter Issue 2024),

In that respect, this paper unfolds through five sections, three of which are key in making sense of the politics and processes of knowledge production. In the introduction, I have laid out the broader stakes of the paper, highlighting the imperative of decolonisation and the role of universities as central sites of knowledge production. I subsequently turn, in the second section, to a critique of the archive—not simply as a repository of historical records but as a producer of power, what is often described as a "discourse of power"—and caution against taking it for granted. In the third section, I examine whether decolonisation is possible in contexts where the archive remains central, revisiting two established methods of engagement: *reading against the grain* and *reading along the grain*. I then move, in the fourth section, to a reflection on the state of knowledge production where I suggest an engagement framework to confront the archive and the discourses of knowledge it sustains. In the conclusion, I draw these threads together, underscoring the challenges and possibilities of rethinking archives in the pursuit of decolonised knowledge.

Archive and the Discourse of Power in Knowledge Production

The archive is a complex and difficult concept to pin down, as it carries multiple connotations (Caswell 2023). Among the many attempts to define it, Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* offers perhaps the most comprehensive formulation, one that foregrounds the power and politics inherent in archives and in the very process of archiving. Derrida conceptualises the archive as a site of both "commencement" and "commandment," a place to which we continually return in search of origins (Derrida 1998: 1). Yet, from his perspective, this quest is ultimately unfulfillable, for what the archive contains are not the events themselves but only their traces, inscribed and fixed through writing. In this sense, the archive functions as "the repository of memories: individual and collective, official and unofficial, licit and illicit, legitimating and subversive" (Bradley 1999: 108). Similarly, as Mbembe (2002: 20) observes:

> […] the archive is [...] not a piece of data, but a status…the product of a process which converts a certain number of documents into items judged to be worthy of preserving and keeping in a public place, where they can be consulted according to well-established procedures and regulations.

In this regard, the archive should never be taken for granted. It contains not only the memories deemed worthy of retrieval, but also the codified processes, meanings, and power dynamics inscribed within them (Burns 2010; Levi 2024; Lihoma 2023; Mertens & Perezzone 2025). As Harriet Bradley notes, "using the archive helps us to understand the dialectical nature of the relationship between past and present and our own positing within" (1999: 107), thereby shaping how we imagine future possibilities through the lens of the past. In this sense, the archive becomes "something that does away with doubt [and in the long run becomes the authority], exerting a debilitating power over such doubt" (Mbembe 2002: 21). This raises critical questions: how does the archive come to acquire such authority, and under what political conditions does this power operate?

Archives, as sites of knowledge production, are inseparable from power. It is so since "no archive arises out of thin air ... [but] each archive has a 'pre-history', in the sense of prior conditions of existence" (Hall 2001: 89). They do not simply preserve the past but actively encode the authority of those who create and control them. As scholars have long argued, archives are not neutral repositories of objective information; rather, they are shaped by processes of selection, exclusion, and transformation that reflect the interests of dominant institutions and communities (Schwartz & Cook 2002; Mbembe 2002; Gilliland 2011). In this sense, archives are not merely buildings or collections of documents, but dynamic sites where texts are reconstituted and invested with new functions (Mbembe 2002). They are therefore contested terrains, where knowledge is produced through and against the power structures that sustain them (Hamilton et al. 2002). Derrida's well-known claim that "there is no political power without control of archives" (1998: 4) underscores the inescapable political character of

these sites. If the knowledge produced from archives is to be relevant and emancipatory, it requires critical engagement with the power relations that underpin them, for only by recognising such power can it be made accountable and open to transformation (Schwartz & Cook 2002).

In this sense, while archives cannot capture the totality of past events, they nonetheless wield authority as authentic sources of memory, even in the face of critiques of their limitations (Bhatia 2020; Daly 2020; 2017; Gutsche-Miller 2020; Mertens & Perezzone 2025; Mbembe 2002). The persistent question, however, concerns the origin of this power: how do archives acquire such authority, and through what political logics is it maintained? Addressing this requires a closer look at the politics embedded in the very processes of archiving. Foucault's concepts of the "regime of truth" (2000: 111–133) and "governmentality" (1991: 87–104; 2000: 201–222) offer productive frameworks for this inquiry. Together, they illuminate how power is exercised not only through what archives contain but through the conditions that determine what counts as knowledge, what is preserved, and what is excluded.

The first concept, 'regime of truth', entails particular ways of thinking about the world that privileges certain forms of knowledge while ignoring or suppressing others, a process strikingly similar archiving itself. In this regard, it can be argued that "every archive is a product of exclusion…only particular histories are deemed to be valuable and thereby only certain vantage points are represented and preserved" (Bhatia 2020: 117). In this sense, the archive acquires the power of knowledge creation precisely by drawing boundaries between fact and fiction, truth and falsehood. At its core, archiving involves decisions about determining "what is and what is not collected, what is merely stored but not catalogued and hence made intellectually accessible), and what is thrown away" (Brown and Davis-Brown 1998: 23). Mbembe (2002) goes even further as he argues the archive's power is bound up with what he terms "the trade with death" (21), a process that unfolds along three interrelated dimensions:

> […] the struggle against the fragment of life being dispersed …, laying something in a coffin, if not to rest, [and then] these elements removed from time and from life are [thus] assigned to be a place and a sepulchre that is perfectly recognisable because it is consecrated: the archives (Mbembe 2002: 22).

Through such processes, the archive acquires a distinct status of power. It is no longer merely a collection of documents but a privileged site of authority, one that is formally designated as a source of truth. As Mbembe explains, "from then on it is consulted. [And in this regard] we are no longer talking about just any document, but a particular document, which has the power, because of a legal designation, to enlighten those who engage in an 'inquiry' into time inherent in co-ownership" (2002: 21).

If the "regime of truth" allows us to underscore different modes of understanding the manifestation of the archive, the second concept, governmentality —the way in which subjects of government, that is, people, are produced—highlights the inseparable link between knowledge and power. It allows us to think of the ways in which individuals are shaped by knowledge systems that render it natural that they should be governed in particular ways (Foucault 1980). In this context, the archive functions as a crucial agent within the system of knowledge that produces us as subjects, shaping how we understand ourselves and our place within structures of authority. Although distinct, both concepts converge in treating knowledge as a source of power, and together they illuminate the dynamics at the heart of knowledge production. This is the politics of knowledge: the struggle over who controls, establishes, and maintains the archive, and by what means (Brown & Davis-Brown 1998: 17). It is precisely this struggle that defines the archive as a site of authoritative knowledge, one whose power is inseparable from the politics that sustain it. It is therefore evident that archives would not pass the neutrality test, as they are fundamentally sites of production of an authentic knowledge that cannot be separated from hegemony. That is why I consider, along with Foucault's power/knowledge dictum, that engaging with archives entails an engagement with power discourse.

Read in the light of the concepts of *regime of truth* and *governmentality*, it becomes possible to see how power permeates the archive and shapes the politics of knowledge production. These frameworks clarify why, although archives are often celebrated as repositories of memory, they in fact reflect the perspectives and interests of those in power (Burns 2010; Lihoma 2023). Because of this hegemonic influence, it is imperative to develop the critical tools necessary to engage with the archive. Only through careful and reflective reading (see section three) can one uncover the operations of power embedded within it and understand how these operations' structure and constrain the production of knowledge. This recognition is central to the argument of this paper: the archive is never neutral but always implicated in the politics of knowledge.

This reality is best captured in the phrase *all knowledge is political*. As Derrida (1998: 4) famously asserts, "there is no political power without control of the archive." The archive is therefore not a passive repository but an active site of high politics, one that complicates the very relationship between power and knowledge. Mbembe (2002: 23) articulates the paradox succinctly: "On the one hand, there is no state without archives … [and] on the other hand, the very existence of the archives constitutes a constant threat to the state" (see also Daly 2017: 315–318). As Paul Lihoma further explains, "perhaps one explanation why some States get threatened by the archive, if Mbembe's position is to be sustained, is that the archive itself has the power to enlighten anyone who engages it in any inquiry" (2023: 296). Thus, knowledge from archive or the archive itself cannot claim to be excluded from politics. As a matter of fact, "an inquiry around archive(s) […] demands an attempt to understand the conditions and circumstances of the preservation of materials as, and exclusion of material from, the record, as well as attention to the relation of power underpinning such inclusion and exclusions" (Schwartz & Cook 2002: 9). Politics are central to every engagement with the archive. What often appear as neutral technical procedures—collection, cataloguing, access, or preservation—are in fact political acts that determine whose histories are recorded and whose are silenced. As Brown and Davis-Brown (1998: 22–23) argue, "collection development" itself reflects the political dimensions of archival and curatorial work. For this reason, archives must be seen as "contested sites of power," shaping memory, truth, history, and identity (Schwartz & Cook 2002: 7–8). They function less as static repositories than as active processes through which knowledge is produced, and state power materialised. Stoler (2002a: 83–85) reminds us that archives should be read not as neutral instruments of retrieval but as monuments of the state and sites of state ethnography. Approached in this way, it becomes clear that archives embody what Schwartz and Cook (2002: 13) call "the loci of power of the present to control what the future will know of the past."

Is Decolonisation Possible?

If archives embody the entanglement of knowledge and power, then any serious engagement with them must also confront the broader project of decolonisation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020; 2018; Pillay 2024). For archives, as we have seen, are never neutral: they are products of exclusion, inscription, and authority, structured by the political logics of those who create and maintain them. To treat them simply as repositories of memory is therefore to reproduce the epistemic hierarchies they enshrine. This recognition opens onto the imperative of decolonisation, understood not merely as the reversal of colonial domination but as a fundamental rethinking of how knowledge is produced, validated, and circulated (Masaka 2021; Pillay 2024: 137-161). Decolonisation in this sense is not only about recovering silenced pasts but also about unsettling the very epistemic foundations that have privileged certain histories, perspectives, and modes of knowing over others (Masaka 2021; Pillay 2024; Puplampu 2021; Thondhlana & Garwe 2021). It is within this context that debates on intellectual decolonisation gain urgency, particularly in the Global South, where scholars and activists have insisted that archives and universities alike must be reimagined as spaces of epistemic freedom.

Differentiated views to intellectual decolonisation calls for developing intelligible ways of approaching the archive to serve as key to unlock the scripted past in the archive. This is particularly notable since archives are "neither the sum of all texts that a culture preserves nor [the] institutions that allow for record preservation ... [but] rather [a] 'system of statements', [of] 'rules of practice' that shape the specific regularities of what can and cannot be said" (Stoler 2002b: 96; Foucault 2002: 89-148). Engaging archives as memories of the inscribed past requires thinking beyond what can be seen immediately. It calls for the extraction of the exoteric and esoteric meanings inscribed into the archive while appreciating the extent to which archives are "fantastic representation of an epistemological master pattern" (Richards 1993: 11). Thus, "whether the archive should be treated as a set of discursive rules, a utopian project, a depot of documents, a corpus of statements, or all above, is not really the question" (Stoler 2002b: 97). The question is rather how to be more cautious and critical of the "making of documents and how we choose to use them, on archives not as sites of knowledge retrieval but of knowledge production, as monuments of states as well as sites of state ethnography" (Stoler 2002b: 90).

Decolonizing the archive entails, for all these reasons, thinking carefully on a number of issues, and adopting "a more sustained engagement with those archives as cultural artefact of fact production, of taxonomies in the making…, [a] move from archive-as-source to archive-as-subject" (Stoler 2002b: 90-93). This proposed move towards engaging archive as the object of study is in no way an easy undertaking (Gordon 2018). In a situation of incomplete archives, or archives with deliberate and significant exclusion of important and key documents, researchers must often turn to transnational archives as well as paying greater attention to form, effect and context than is usually accorded to contemporary state records as well as private individual records (Falola 2024; Daly 2020; 2017).

The Circuit of Knowledge Production: Archive Engagement Framework

Engagement with archive has for quite long been approached as reading 'against the grain'. This has been a dominant approach adopted in the reading of the so-called 'colonial archive' (Falola 2024; Levi 2024; Mertens & Perezzone 2025; Stoler 2002b). However, Stoler's *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (2009), proposed an additional and more critical way of archival reading. This approach is not simply an alternative but a complementary and profoundly decolonial strategy of working with the colonial archive. The premise of this method is that "knowing the circuit of knowledge production is important prior to reading against the grain; one needs first to explore the grain with care and read along it" (Stoler 2009: 50). As she further notes, "reading along the archival grain draws our sensibilities to the archive's granular rather than seamless texture, to the rough surface that mottles its hue and shapes its form" (Stoler 2009: 53). In this light, "we need to read for its regularities, for its logic of recall, for its densities and distributions, for its consistencies of misinformation, omission, and mistake—along the archival grain" (Stoler 2002b: 100). That is to say, while reading *against the grain* seeks to recover suppressed voices and uncover silenced histories, reading *along the grain* focuses on understanding the structures of power, and the silences and omissions, that shape the very production of the archive itself.

The first, and perhaps most important, is to identify the creator of the document under examination and the reasons for its existence. Understanding who created the archive and why provides the foundation for interpreting both the exoteric and esoteric meanings it may convey. It situates the archive within the circumstances of its production, since archiving is never a haphazard process. Given that archives aim to serve as repositories of memory among other functions, one must first ask whose memory is being stored and for what purpose. This is crucial, since what enters the archive does not necessarily reflect events in their totality. As has often been observed, what is preserved in the archive is not the event itself but its inscription. Thus, it is necessary to know who inscribes events, who preserves them, and under what conditions such efforts take place. As Marx succinctly put it in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852): "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances

existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx 1934: 10). In this sense, archivists, as makers of history through their archiving practices, do not simply select and preserve documents at will. They do so under conditions shaped by authority, often constrained by institutional or political imperatives that dictate what purposes the archive is meant to serve.

The second step is perhaps the most challenging: establishing the reasons that dictate the selection of what is archived—that is, the processes of inclusion and exclusion. What we often encounter in archives are documents that have been sifted from many and subsequently sanctified as authoritative records of the past. As Stoler observes, "archival convention might designate who were reliable 'sources,' what constituted 'enough' evidence, and what—in the absence of information—could be filled in to make a credible plot" (Stoler 2002b: 103). This entails examining the processes behind what Achille Mbembe calls "the rituals involved … that is, the process which culminates in a 'secular' text with a previously different function, ending its career in the archive—or rather becoming an archive … [something with] power as a relic, and with capacity to function as an instituting imaginary" (Mbembe 2002: 19). Thus, what we read in the archive may not correspond to the intentions or contexts of its original creation. For this reason, it is imperative to establish why a particular document became part of the archive in the first place. As Stoler reminds us, "whether documents are trustworthy, authentic, and reliable remain pressing questions, but a turn to the social and political conditions that produced those documents…" (Stoler 2002b: 91). This insight underlies her call for reading *along the grain* as a prerequisite for reading *against the grain* for enabling us to discern both the exoteric and esoteric meanings of the archive.

The third step, closely related to the first two, is to examine how a given archive or document relates to other documents within the archive. This not only provides grounds for understanding individual records but also helps to identify omissions, silences, and gaps. Such an approach is particularly important when working with postcolonial archives, where dispersal and fragmentation are common. The study of postcolonial African history offers a case in point: linking documents across disparate archival collections has often been essential for tracking absences and developing alternative strategies of reconstruction, as seen in many archival studies of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), also known as the Biafra secessionist war (Daly 2020; 2017).

Building on these methodological considerations, a further step has been increasingly emphasized by scholars: the need to rethink archival engagement through traditional and alternative approaches. While both forms of reading the archive—*along* and *against the grain*—provide valuable ways of understanding, Stoler (2002b), among others, has called for a shift in focus from the archive's content to its form. Her call is an invitation to view "archiving as a process rather than [as] things [and to look at] archives as epistemological experiments rather than as sources… but to [their] particular and sometimes peculiar form… [a] move from archive-as-source to archive-as-subject" (Stoler 2002b: 87). This constitutes the fourth key element to be taken into account when engaging with the archive. In other words, what makes the archive powerful is not merely the nature or origin of the documents it holds, but the form they acquire in the course of cataloguing, classification, and preservation (Gordon 2018). These processes complicate not only the ways in which records are stored but also the procedures that govern their circulation and access. The latter two—circulation and access—are particularly significant, as they involve "decisions about who gets to see what, and this is shaped in part by the classification system or categorical order" (Brown and Davis-Brown 1998: 26). Such mechanisms constitute the very basis of archival power. As Bradley observes, "despite our increasing awareness of illusions of historical reconstruction and recovery, the archive [for quite long now has assumed and] assumes an ever greater intellectual and social significance" (Bradley 1999: 117).

Finally, it is necessary to attest to the role of the archive in knowledge production. This involves examining the practices of knowledge creation—whether institutional or rhetorical—revealed by the documents under consideration. In many ways, this step depends on the previous four, calling for a fair assessment and appraisal of the consequences of any particular document. Given that archives are often understood as inscriptions of the past rather than the past itself, as representations of dominant ideology, and as necessarily incomplete, we are left with a pressing question: how do we make sense of what is not there? This question is a wake-up call not to take archives for granted or to treat them as repositories of ready-made answers to our many questions and knowledge-seeking pursuits. Two dimensions of power are especially relevant here: the "power over information and [the] power of information institutions" (Schwartz & Cook 2002: 9). Attending to these dimensions helps to define what we ought to expect as the outcome of archival knowledge production.

In addition to recognizing the role of the archive in knowledge production, a second consideration is the training of archivists, historians, and researchers in how to properly approach and engage with archival material. This is indispensable, and its absence partly explains why Africa continues to lag behind in global knowledge production, contributing an estimated one or two percent of the total global knowledge production output (Fonn et al. 2018; Thondhlana & Garwe 2021). Improving training requires attention to two interrelated issues. First, there is a need to increase the number of PhD students in various disciplines, particularly in historical fields and specializations, in order to strengthen their research skills and capacities to engage with archives. As has been noted, one of the "major challenges facing African universities relates not only to their cultures and researcher behaviour …, but also to their limited research capacities" (Thondhlana & Garwe 2021: 10; also see Puplampu 2021). Expanding postgraduate research training is therefore one of the most effective ways of addressing this challenge.

Second, there is an urgent need to increase research budgets in African universities. For too long, such budgets have been minimal or even non-existent, forcing universities to rely on foreign firms for research funding—an arrangement that undermines their ability to define their own research agendas, which is at the heart of knowledge production. For example, in 2022 Tanzania's gross domestic expenditure on research and development (GERD) was only 0.52 percent of its GDP. This figure falls below the minimum 1 percent threshold agreed upon by the African Union (UNECA 2018). Such chronic underfunding severely limits the ability of African scholars to participate actively in global knowledge production.

Third, there is a need to overhaul curricula and, more specifically, the orientation of training for historians. A key issue is the serious and systematic teaching of historical research methodology (Crawford et al. 2021; Eskildsen 2008; Gunn & Faire 2012). This requires reconsideration not only of philosophical and historiographical orientations but also of practical approaches to archival use. New courses should equip students with the skills to uncover both the exoteric and esoteric meanings encoded in archives, as well as the ability to identify the gaps that exist in many collections, particularly those concerning postcolonial African history (Daly 2020; 2017).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the role of archives in the production of knowledge, with particular attention to African history. Framed by the decolonisation turn and the politics of knowledge production, the analysis has demonstrated that archives are not neutral repositories but sites where power is inscribed, contested, and reproduced. As instruments that shape rather than simply record the past, archives determine which voices are preserved and which are silenced, thereby structuring the conditions of possibility for historical knowledge.

I have argued, first, that the archive must be understood within the nexus of power and politics, following Foucault's insights on *regimes of truth* and *governmentality*. Second, I have underscored the methodological and epistemological necessity of decolonisation, examining archival reading strategies—*along the grain*

and *against the grain* as—decolonial practices that illuminate both the internal logic of the archive and the suppressed voices it obscures. Third, I have situated these debates within the broader context of knowledge production, highlighting both the persistent limitations of archive and the methodological challenges of knowledge production through archives.

What emerges from this discussion is that the question of the archive is inseparable from the question of the sites of knowledge production. To decolonise knowledge requires not only rethinking how archives are engaged but also transforming the institutional conditions under which knowledge is produced and circulated. The archive, the scholars, and the sites of knowledge production are bound together in a shared epistemic project; their futures must therefore be imagined together. While this paper has foregrounded archives as both sites and instruments of power, it also gestures toward the urgent need to address wider systemic issues in African higher education—research capacity, funding, and the training of researchers is chief among them. These are not ancillary concerns but central to the struggle for epistemic freedom. In the end, the decolonisation of knowledge is not simply about recovering silenced pasts. It is about reshaping the very terms on which knowledge is produced, validated, and transmitted. Archives remain critical to this work, but they must be read critically, situated institutionally, and reimagined as part of a larger project of intellectual sovereignty in Africa and beyond.

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African Archives, Digital Humanities, and Decolonial Narratives

A Case Study of Archivi.ng

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Abstract

The erasure and marginalisation of African knowledge systems have been central to the project of colonial domination, creating what Achille Mbembe describes as an "archival vacuum" that distorts memory and limits the possibilities of postcolonial futures. While existing scholarship has explored the historical suppression of African cultural practices and intellectual traditions, there has been insufficient engagement with what Verne Harris terms the "archival slippage" that continues to undermine African custodianship of its own records. This paper examines the transformative role of digital humanities in addressing these legacies, focusing on how platforms such as Archivi.ng are dismantling barriers to access, challenging Western ownership of African archives, and restoring narrative control to local communities. Situated within the frameworks of Afrofuturism, Digital African Humanities, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's call to "decolonise the mind," the study argues that digitisation is not merely an act of preservation but a deliberate intervention in the politics of knowledge production. Through practical case studies, the paper demonstrates how digital archives function as bridges between Africa's historical memory and its technological future, enabling narrative sovereignty and reshaping the study of African history for the digital age.

Keywords: Digital Humanities, Afrofuturism, African Archives, Historical Preservation, Archivi.ng, Decolonisation of Knowledge

Introduction

For decades, archives in Africa have continually functioned as tools of colonial authority, as they have become spaces where memory are fractured, local voices silenced and historical knowledge reconstituted through imperial logic. Far from being neutral sites of preservation, archives were embedded in systems of domination which gives privileges to the perspectives of colonial administrators, missionaries and European scholars (de Suremain, 2018). As Achille Mbembe (2002) opined, the archive in colonial contexts operated a mechanism of epistemic violence, as it determines not just what was remembered, but who was given the permission to speak and whose knowledge was given legitimacy. Hence, a number of important African events, cultures and worldviews were either omitted, distorted or rendered invincible within official historic records.

In this case, decolonisation of the archive needs to be understood not just as the physical recovery of African historical materials, but as an epistemological act which is a radical rethinking of how knowledge is not just produced, but circulated and validated as it is a process of reclaiming narrative control, while restoring agency and challenging the dominant perspectives through which African histories have long been filtered (Muchefa, 2019). It is in this vein that Ashi-Nikoi (2024) noted that through the decentralising of archival control and

the expansion of public access, decolonisation allows African communities to reclaim their roles as custodians and authors of their own histories as this approach seeks to move ownership from foreign institutions to the cultures and peoples whose histories have often been archived without their consent.

In the midst of this struggle for epistemic justice, digital humanities have emerged as an important and powerful methodological ally. Far from just being simply a set of tools, digital humanities are a reflection of the opportunity that comes with the democratisation of historical knowledge, as it challenges archival silence and nurtures inclusivity in memory work (Brennan, 2018). Techniques such as digitization, text mining and the adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) driven metadata creation has enabled scholars to recover lost voices from Africa that are buried deep in colonial records and inaccessible repositories (Zaagsma, 2022; Jockers & Underwood, 2015). Joo et al., (2021) argues that text mining helps in the identification of patterns that are hidden and long over looked narratives within historical texts, while meta data tagging improves not just discoverability but also organisation of digitised materials. Also, digital systems allow for participatory archiving which provides African communities the opportunity to influence and contribute to and influence the historical record (McGregor et al, 2025).

A major example of this approach is Archivi.ng, a Nigerian led project which is committed to the preservation and most importantly accessibility of African historical records. It was established in tackling the archival void in Nigeria as it focuses on the digitisation of colonial and post-colonial newspapers which are most times inaccessible and scattered not just in Nigeria, but also across foreign lands. By making these sources publicly available online, the platform does not only preserve historical materials, but further re-centers African perspectives within historical discourse (Aarchivi.ng, 2025). This model is community driven, as it engages volunteers, historians and institutions which is reflective of a decolonial ethic of shared authority and narrative reclamation.

This essay argues that digital humanities provides a critical pathway for the decolonisation of African archives as it restores epistemic agency, enhances access to narratives at the margins and nurtures inclusive participation in the construction of historical knowledge. Using Archiv.ng as a case study, the essay looks at how the creation of metadata, digitisation and digital platforms are challenging colonial legacies while enabling new forms of archival practices which are grounded in African agency.

How Colonialism Shaped African Archival Practices

It is imperative to note that the legacies of colonialism in Africa are deeply embedded in the way records have not only been preserved, but also controlled. Gordon, (2014) argues that during the period of colonisation, European officers imposed western centric archival systems that were developed mainly to serve the needs of the colonial government instead of the local populace. Hence, these archives documented taxation, military campaigns, trade and governance structure, but many times, they put in the margins and distorted the perspectives and the voices of the African.

One of the major effects of colonial archival practices was the priority given to written documentation at the expense of oral traditions which for a long time had been key to the historiography of the African people. Dillard, (2018) alluded that local knowledge system, which include storytelling and griot traditions as well as symbolic keeping of records were disregarded as either unscientific and unreliable. Due to this, colonial records were not able to capture the full complex nature of African communities and societies, in which they were reduced to mere administrative reports that only reflected the viewpoints of the European.

It is imperative to add that a significant number of official documents that were related to colonial governance were migrated to European cities after most African countries gained their independence, which made it challenging for African countries to reclaim their historical records. Thus, archives which contained important

information on the anti-colonial struggles, colonial economic policies and local governance systems were stored in faraway France, the UK, Belgium and Portugal, while effectively removing them from local accessibility (Livsey, 2022). For example, the British Library and archives holds thousands of documents that are related to Nigeria's colonial history which included records of European expedition, reports of missionary work and multinationals as well as reports on nationalists' movements in Nigeria. At the same time the French archives contain large numbers of materials on French West Africa, which makes it important for researcher to travel to these countries to carry out their researches (Livsey, 2022). Hence, this situation creates important barriers to access, especially for African scholars who lack the financial wherewithal and institutional support to travel to these European cities for researches. This colonial legacy has even continued till date in influencing archival research in Africa, with researchers and historians travelling frequently to Europe in other to access important documents pertaining to their own histories.

Apart from the physical archives, European academic institutes have further dominated the interpretation of the history of Africa. A number of historical narrative about Africa have been constructed via the perspectives of European researchers, which has led to omission and heavy distortions (Negedu & Ojomah, 2018). When included, Bakare et al., (2023) opines that African voices most times is framed within colonial categories instead of being examined in their own terms. This has led to a long standing imbalance in the production of historical knowledge, in which African is studied as an object instead of a subject with its own agency and historical continuity. Colonial archives imposed foreign logics on African memory, displacing indigenous knowledge systems (Oyěwùmí, 2005). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o similarly critiques Western institutions for monopolising historical interpretation, calling for the radical Africanisation of intellectual frameworks and custodianship of memory (Thiong'o, 1986). It is in this vein that Achille Mbembe argues that colonial archives were structured not to preserve truth but to serve imperial domination.

Along the same lines, it is arguable that although local archival institutions have been established across the African continent, access to historical records—particularly in countries like Nigeria—remains limited. Many important historical events, such as the hosting of the All-African Games in 1973 or the Kano plane crash involving returning pilgrims from Mecca, are scarcely preserved in Nigerian archives. While they were documented in local newspapers at the time, today they are more readily found in foreign repositories such as The New York Times.

As Fu'ad Lawal, founder of Archivi.ng, observes, "Things are only as interesting as how much you know about them" (Fu'ad Lawal, personal interview, 2025). Yet our ability to know Nigerian history is frequently hampered by systemic challenges within local archival systems. Researchers often have to rely on foreign institutions—such as archives in the UK—that are better organized and more accessible than Nigeria's state or national archives. For example, Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún, a renowned Nigerian writer, cultural activist, and filmmaker, reported that while working on his documentary Ebrohimi Road: A Museum of Memory, he spent more time in UK archives than in Nigerian ones, simply because of accessibility barriers (Fu'ad Lawal, personal interview, 2025).

This lack of local access highlights the urgency of digital decolonisation, which ensures that Africans not only own their stories and histories but also control and access them. This is precisely the mission of Archivi.ng, which seeks to reclaim Africa's historical narratives by digitising them and making them widely available to the public. The absence of local archival control perpetuates what may be called *archival alienation*, undermining communities' ability to engage with and reclaim their historical narratives.

For these reasons, the decolonisation of African archives cannot be reduced to the repatriation of materials alone. It is also about reclaiming the power to narrate and interpret African history from African perspectives. Initiatives like Archivi.ng play a vital role in this process by democratising access to historical records and

challenging the monopolisation of knowledge by European institutions. This dynamic underscores how archival control remains a tool of epistemic dominance, sustaining inequalities in both historical access and interpretation.

Yet, even with these important digital efforts, African attempts to create archival systems that challenge inherited narratives have often lagged. This is not simply a matter of physical infrastructure but also a reflection of the epistemological frameworks of archival science itself—frameworks that remain tied to colonial models. To think about archives on the continent still requires engaging with colonial legacies in both practice and theory. This becomes evident in the case of the Ibadan Archives.

Building on these, it becomes clear that, the archives in African Studies cannot be understood just as a passive storehouse, but rather as a site of epistemic contestation. As Mbembe (2002) argues, colonial archives were never mere records, but instruments of power designed to control, classify and give legitimise imperial powers. This logic structured what counted as "history" has systematically marginalized African voices, especially oral and vernacular traditions. Decolonising the archive therefore entails more than recovering local narratives; it requires a fundamental challenge to Eurocentric systems of knowledge validation (Kumalo, 2020). Oyewumi (1997) frames this as resisting 'colonisation of the cognitive' in which African historical thought has been filtered through Western lens. From this perspectives, initiatives such as Archivi.ng function as interventions in both methods and memory. By digitising fragile Nigerian newspapers while centering local participation, they reclaim narrative authority and redefine archival authorship.

This type of work is transforming the very discipline of African Studies. Harris (2002) stresses that the archive is always political-a space of resistance and domination. By foregrounding African custodianship, Archivi.ng disrupts the Western institutional monopoly over African historical materials and sources as it shifts research ethics towards accessibility, community collaboration and epistemic justice. This signals a broader methodological re-orientation: archives are no longer treated as passive imperial instruments but as contested, dynamic and co-produced sites of knowledge.

Thus, the deoclonisation of archive is not just an ancillary task, it is also at the heart of making African Studies responsive to the continent's intellectual sovereignty, historical complexity and postcolonial futures.

Decolonising the archive is not just a metaphor. it is a methodological reorientation that centers African voices, agency, and historical complexity.

Against this backdrop, Archivi.ng treats digitisation as a decolonial method, not a technical afterthought. By relocating custody, description, and access to Nigerian institutions and publics, it creates pathways for materials to circulate outside colonial gatekeeping, ensuring that African communities speak from the archive rather than through it. In this sense, digitisation becomes the outlet by which colonial narratives are escaped and centres African voices, agency, and historical complexity.

Digitisation is therefore not only an important step for preserving historical records but also for radically expanding access. Many African archives are stored under fragile conditions, vulnerable to climate, poor storage, and chronic underfunding. Through digitisation, these materials are safeguarded against loss while becoming available to future generations without the risks of handling delicate paper records (Zaagsma, 2022). Beyond preservation, digitisation also breaks down barriers of access. In contexts like Nigeria—where bureaucratic hurdles and lack of infrastructure have historically restricted archival research—digital collections now allow scholars to access records remotely, without having to cross continents to consult their own history. In doing so, digital archives have become powerful platforms for the decolonisation of African history, reclaiming narratives long controlled by European institutions.

Archivi.ng is at the forefront of this work. It has pioneered digital archiving initiatives in Nigeria, taking significant steps to preserve historical publications. A key example is its digitisation of newspapers and magazines such as PM News and others, ensuring that these sources remain available to present and future generations of scholars (Archivi.ng, 2025). One of the greatest challenges in this process has been fragmentation: many newspaper issues have been lost or scattered across multiple private and institutional collections. Through collaboration with private collectors and newspaper agencies, Archivi.ng has been able to recover and digitise these dispersed materials, making them freely available to the general public.

At the same time, digitisation alone is not sufficient. The creation of robust metadata is essential to ensure that historical records are not only preserved but also accessible and searchable. Metadata provides the structured information—date of publication, topic, author, keywords, and location—that allows digital archives to be meaningfully navigated and interpreted (Jockers & Underwood, 2015). Without such structures, digitised records risk replicating the inaccessibility of their physical counterparts.

As African institutions take up the challenge of digitisation and metadata creation, they contest colonial custodianship and reposition local narratives at the centre of historical discourse. In doing so, they push African Studies toward a methodological reorientation, where archives are no longer conceived as imperial instruments but as dynamic, community-driven sites of memory and knowledge production.

As African institutions take up the challenge of digitisation and metadata creation, they contest colonial custodianship and reposition local narratives at the centre of historical discourse. In doing so, they push African Studies toward a methodological reorientation, where archives are no longer conceived as imperial instruments but as dynamic, community-driven sites of memory and knowledge production. Building on this, digital humanities tools further what becomes possible once archives are digitised. One of the most powerful applications lies in the use of computational methods such as text mining and Natural Language Processing (NLP). These technologies allow researchers to process large volumes of archival texts at scale, revealing important themes, recurring language patterns, and even hidden biases embedded in historical narratives (Piotrowski, 2012). By uncovering these patterns, digital methods not only enhance scholarly analysis but also deepen the decolonial project: they make visible the ways colonial epistemologies shaped the archive while offering African scholars tools to reclaim and reinterpret historical records on their own terms.

For instance, text mining can be adopted on colonial records in examining how colonial officers described African communities. Makoni et al., (2012) argued that colonial documents most times frame African communities using language that are either negative or simplistic, which further reinforces the African stereotype as a continent which is not just underdeveloped, but primitive. With the use of computational analysis, African scholars can reveal these patterns and challenge these distortions that have continued to influence mainstream historical opinions.

The ability to uncover hidden voices in colonial archives is another powerful application of text mining. African perspectives have traditionally been omitted, buried in footnotes and confined to marginal comments within European reports. By interrogating archival materials, historians have recovered overlooked narratives. This is the case, for example of the active role of women resisting colonial laws, topics long marginalised in African narratives (Amoah, 2024). Similarly, studies of abolition records have revealed the agency of Nigerians in the struggle to end the Atlantic slave trade, thus challenging the narrow view that Europeans alone drove the abolition movement (University College London , 2025).

Through the application of machine learning and NLP, scholars can identify sources that has been historically overlooked and undervalued, while reconstructing historical narratives from an African and more specifically Nigerian perceptive (Mitra & Mukhopadhyay). Artificial intelligence plays a key role in addressing fragmentation: models are being trained to fill gaps in incomplete manuscripts, translate texts in local languages, and even simulate historical dialogue from archival data (Dunsin et al., 2024).

For instance, Artificial intelligence plays a key role in addressing fragmentation: models are being trained to fill gaps in incomplete manuscripts, translate texts in local languages, and even simulate historical dialogue from archival data (Dunsin et al., 2024). AI-driven reconstructions of lost oral histories, for instance, could enable descendants of enslaved Africans to recover cultural knowledge erased by slavery. At the same time, machine learning algorithms can examine patterns in ancient artefacts to help reconstruct aspects of daily life in precolonial African communities.

As these technologies evolve, they promise not only to transform how African history is narrated but also to recover what was once thought lost. Computational tools expose colonial silences and distortions, empowering African scholars to reconstruct histories with greater agency, nuance, and critical insight.

In addition to computational methods like text mining and NLP, another crucial dimension of digital humanities is the transformation of how history is communicated. It is not enough to recover and reinterpret hidden voices within the archive; these voices must also be presented in ways that are accessible, engaging, and resonant for wider publics.

Honarmand Ebrahimi & Milford, (2022) argue that traditional archives often present history in a text heavy and static format that feel inaccessible to the non-specialist. Digital storytelling addresses this situation by adopting interactive tools such as maps, timelines and other forms of multimedia to make history immersive and engaging (Davidson & Reid, 2021).

Digital storytelling is particularly important for African history as it enables people to experience historical narratives through interactions, visuals and sounds which mirrors traditional African storytelling methods. Reconstructions via virtual reality for instance helps in the recreation of precolonial African cities, while interactive digital maps, helps in the visualisation of patterns of migration and historical events over the years (Davidson & Reid, 2021). These methods bring history to life and enables users to engage with historical sources in new ways. As a matter of fact, it is increasingly common today, to come across digital projects that use podcasts, archived oral history, timelines and online exhibitions to "tell the African story" from an indigenous perspective. Platforms such as African Digital Heritage Project, History in Africa and the John Randle centre for Yoruba culture and history and Archivi.ng Oral History archive have created exhibitions, audio and video documentaries and interactive tools to make African history accessible.

Timelines in particular are highly effective in visually connecting historical events. Archivi.ng developed a timeline of Nigeria's history with newspaper headlines showcasing the political and social history of Nigeria from pre-independence till independence during a public exhibition (Tracka.ng, 2024). In addition, Archivi.ng has adopted the use of multimedia storytelling through YouTube roundtables, featuring storytellers, creative and historians. These discussions contextualise historical sources thereby making them engaging to the younger generation (Archivi.ng, 2024).

Archivi.ng is exploring short video storytelling on platforms such as Tik Tok, Instagram and X, reaching a wider audience and making archival materials and social historical narratives more relatable and digestible. Via interactive engagement, digital humanities is ensuring that African history is not just preserved, but also active shared and reclaimed by Africans themselves (Archivi.ng, 2025).

While these innovations demonstrate the transformative potential of digital humanities in reclaiming African history, they also highlight the considerable obstacles that remain. The promise of projects like Archivi.ng depends not only on creativity and technological innovation but also on the ability to confront systemic challenges that continue to hinder archival accessibility on the continent.

Fragmentation of materials across various locations is one of the biggest challenges in the digitisation of African historical materials. A number of important documents and manuscripts are spread across various archives and private collections as well as foreign museums. This dispersal makes it challenging to identify,

collect and digitise these materials in a comprehensive and systematic way (de la Porte & Higgs, 2019). For example, in Nigeria, colonial documents are stored in national archives located in Kaduna, Ibadan and Enugu. However, other important colonial materials are stored in the UK museums and libraries. At the same time, old colonial newspapers, photographs and documents are often held by private individuals, journalists and families who makes access impossible, inconsistent and unpredictable.

The scattered nature of the African archive means that researchers need to meander through various bureaucracies in order to access various collections, which delays processes and efforts towards digitisation. At the same time, poor record keeping and misclassification in archives that exists makes it challenging to locate major materials. Unless there is a concerted effort in mapping and consolidating African archives, digitisation will remain a major challenge.

Another major obstacle is the ethical and legal debate surrounding intellectual property rights and custodianship.

As Fu'ad Lawal, founder of Archivi.ng rightly observes, the ethical and legal concerns that surrounds intellectual property rights has further complicated the digitisation of African archives. In most cases, custodians of historical materials imposes strict restrictions on their usage (Fu'ad Lawal, personal interview, 2025). And some individuals and institutions refuses to grant permission for digitisation out of fear over copyrights violation, loss of control of the materials or dispute over ownership of data. A prominent example is the case of the Benin Bronze which remain in British and German museums despite calls from African government and communities for reparations and restitutions. European institutions have justified their retention of these artifacts on the basis of legal protections, which also restrict public access and prevent any digitisation efforts (Forni & Steiner, 2018). Even within Africa, state owned archives have continued to impose considerable fees and excessive bottlenecks further obstructing the efforts to digitise these materials for research and educational purposes (Ayodimeji , 2024). Navigating these issues requires the design of legal frameworks that balance public accessibility with respect for custodial rights. Partnerships between private institutions, governments and digital archivists will be essential in ensuring that African historical materials are freely accessed while maintaining ethical standards.

One of the major institutional challenges in the efforts towards digitising historical materials is the divide between private and public archives. Amodu, (2019) argues that archives that are owned by the state are often underfunded and poorly maintained, while private archives are most times inaccessible as a result of personal ownership and restrictions.

Institutional barriers and bureaucracy present yet another challenge. As Amodu (2019) notes, state-owned archives are often underfunded and poorly maintained, while private archives are most times inaccessible as a result of personal ownership and restrictions. This divide between public and private custodianship perpetuates uneven access and slows the process of digitisation. Without addressing these institutional barriers, even the most ambitious digitisation projects risk being undermined.

State owned such as the Ibadan National archives continues to struggle with shortages of staff, outdated infrastructures and inadequate funding. Users frequently report missing or deteriorating documents as well as long delays caused by bureaucratic inefficiency. On the other side, private collections, most especially newspapers held by journalists and private individuals are often well preserved but are inaccessible to the public. And when access is granted which is rare, the cost is prohibitively high. Moreover, private custodians are reluctant to digitise their materials due to concerns on copyright infringement, financial compensation and the loss of ownership of materials.

Addressing these issues requires a collaborative approach in which public institutions and private collectors work together through partnerships and licensing agreements to make African historical records more widely accessible. Such collaboration would help overcome the current divide between public neglect and private inaccessibility, opening pathways for a more inclusive archival landscape

Another major obstacle lies in technical and financial constraints. Digitisation is an extremely labour intensive process that requires careful handling at every stage; scanning fragile material, creation of metadata and digital storage management. A significant number of African archives contain millions of pages of newspapers, records and handwritten manuscripts each of which must be digitised to maintain legibility and quality (Balogun & Adjei, 2018). The sheer scale of the work, combined with limited funding and technological infrastructure, slows progress significantly and places added pressure on already under-resourced institutions.

Archivi.ng's work on the digitising of the various newspapers in its repository has shown that the process is not only laborious, but it further requires extensive human resources. The documents must be cleaned, repaired and carefully scanned prior to undergoing the process of digitisation. Other documents require the use of **optical character recognition (OCR) technology in order to convert printed text into formats that are machine readable** (Fu'ad Lawal, personal interview, 2025)**.**

Furthermore, because a significant number of historical records are written in multiple languages, including local African scripts, the involvement of historians and linguists in digitisation processes has become increasingly urgent. Without sufficient funding and trained experts, however, such initiatives often take years to complete, delaying both preservation and access.

The cost of tools such as including scanners, cloud storage, and data management systems present another major challenge. Given that African archives often operate on limited budgets, acquiring the software and hardware needed for large scale digitisation projects becomes particularly difficult (Fu'ad Lawal, personal interview, 2025). Beyond the equipment, digitisation requires a wide range of expertise that include archivists, historians, data scientists and software developers. The scarcity of professionals in these field makes it challenging to sustain long term archival initiatives. As a result, many African archives depend on external funding to support digitisation. Yet, funding often comes with conditions that restrict local control over historical records.

The growing importance of digital archiving has accelerated calls for regional and nationwide digitisation initiatives. In Nigeria and across the continent, a significant number of newspapers and government well records has remained undigitised, leaving and them vulnerable to been loss and decay. The urgency of this work cannot be overstated: materials such as newspapers and paper documents have a short lifespan of no more fifty years before they deteriorate beyond use (Zaagsma, 2022).

The ongoing work of projects such as Archivi.ng in Nigeria illustrates both the possibilities and the limitations of current efforts. While these initiatives have made progress, they also reveal critical gaps that exist elsewhere. Indeed, calls have emerged from across the continent to digitise historical records, reflecting the fact that the absence of digital archives is a shared and widespread challenge. Expanding digitisation efforts, therefore, is not only about preventing historical erasure but also about bridging long-standing gaps in the preservation of African knowledge. Such initiatives ensure that the continent's histories, stories, and narratives are safeguarded and remain accessible for future generations.

Building on this urgency is the recognition that no single country can preserve Africa's histories in isolation. Given that colonial borders arbitrary divide ethnic groups and historical events across multiple territories these cross border collaboration is important for effective digital archiving. A single historical event may have records scattered across archives in Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone and in Nigeria, making it difficult to construct a cohesive narrative (Fu'ad Lawal, personal interview, 2025). Regional cooperation will help in pooling resources, share experiences and expertise as well as develop a common strategy and approach towards digitisation. Thus, by working together, African countries will be able to create more inclusive and stronger repositories that reflect the interconnectedness of their shared histories.

It is important to stress that digitisation alone is not enough; Archives must also be made accessible and engaging. Too often. historical records have remained locked behind bureaucratic barriers or stored in systems that discourage public usage (Amodu, 2019). A critical step toward accessibility is the development of user-friendly platforms– such as websites, mobile applications and even social media channels– that broaden public to enhance engagement.

Equally important is ensuring that, archives reflect perspectives and narratives of African peoples. Let's Consider the case of the Kudirat Abiola. Following her assassination, the New York Times reported it under the headline: 'Wife of Jailed Nigerian Opposition Leader is Slain' (The New York Times, 1996). In contrast, PM News, a Nigerian newspaper ran with another headline: 'How Kudi Died'. The difference in these headlines is striking. The difference is striking: while the first presents a detached report shaped by an external gaze, the second offers a locally grounded investigation that resonates with the lived reality. Making African-authored archives accessible, therefore, is not only about preservation but also about narrative sovereignty—ensuring that Africans are able to tell their own stories and histories on their own terms.

Building on the need for accessibility, sustaining digital archiving also requires integration into education. African students go through the four walls of schools without meaningfully engaging with primary historical sources (Fu'ad Lawal, personal interview, 2025). Through the incorporation of interactive digital tools including digital timelines, online exhibitions and podcasts, archives will enrich social studies, literature and history curricula. The, Archivi.ng YouTube roundtable offers as a model of how history can be made relevant and engaging. Schools and universities should adopt similar practice, ensuring that students do not only merely learn history, but actively interact with it. In this way, a new generation of historians, creative, storytellers and digital humanists will emerge to interpret and at the same time preserve the rich past of the African continent.

In addition to the need for accessibility and integration into education, finance is one of the most pressing challenges facing digital archiving in Africa is financial sustainability. A significant number of projects depend on short term foreign grants, which makes long term preservation uncertain. In order to break this cycle, Ojumu, (2024) argues that African countries must design models for local funding that will integrate support from the government, investment from the private sector and contributions from wealthy Africans. Public private partnerships and sponsorships from the corporate sector will further create a stable stream for revenue, while collaboration with universities and tech companies will lower costs of technology and storage. South Africa's History Archive (SAHA) project is an example of how strong local partnerships will ensure the longevity of archival projects, which enhances self-sufficiency in the preservation of Africa's historical records (SAHA, 2025).

Funding from African academic institutions is important for the decolonization of knowledge production and the preservation of history. When African governments allocate budgets to digitisation and simplify archival policies, they are able to assert control over their own historical narratives and perspective instead of relaying ion external agencies with the potentiality of biased agendas (Ojumu, 2024). At the same time, university investment in digital humanities further ensures that the training of digital historians and future archivists is deeply grounded in African narratives and perspectives as well as methodologies and priorities.

Through the prioritisation of meta data management, archival research and computational history, African schools can be able to reclaim their agency over their intellectual heritage and challenge any form of colonial legacies embedded in archival practices. Furthermore, funding from within Africa reduces dependency on western institutions, which most time frame African history through these foreign lenses while empowering local scholars to tell their own stories. As more universities commit their resources to digital preservation, they strengthen to a larger movement of epistemic declonisation–one in which African knowledge systems are not just accessible, but also well documented and valued on their own terms.

The reclamation of Africa's historical narratives is not just about preserving documents, but about self-representation, historical justice and epistemic sovereignty. For years, African histories have been mediated via Western institutional models, which most times silences local voices and opinions. The decolonisation of archives entails the restoration of control and agency to African institutions and communities which ensures that history is told by those who lived and experienced it. Hence, this process, digital humanities through platforms like Archivi.ng which is playing an important role in the democratisation of access, digitising rare materials while amplifying local grounded knowledge

And yet, this major changes are experiencing significant issues such as technological limitations, institutions bottlenecks and over reliance on foreign funding which most times imposes external priorities. Addressing these obstacle demands increased investment in local infrastructure, integration of digital methods into African academic syllabus and support for community driven archival programs. Partnerships with libraries, universities, the civil societies and technologies while help in developing resilient, accessible and inclusive archives across Africa.

Importantly, the decolonisation of the archive is not just a technical fix, it is an intellectual and political reorientation at the heart of African Studies. As community based and digital initiatives are reclaiming oral traditions and fragmented histories, they reshape the discipline's core assumptions which include what counts as evidence, who creates memory and how African pasts inform African futures. These efforts are reflective of broader turn from Eurocentric epistemologies towards Afrocentric models, in which the archive has become not just a colonial vault, but a living participatory space of African intellectual sovereignty and historical continuity.

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The Language Policy in Senegal

Digital Opportunities, Decolonial Narratives, and African Futures

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Abstract

This paper traces the evolution of Senegal's French-only language policy from its colonial inception to the present, focusing on postcolonial education reforms from Léopold Sédar Senghor to the newly elected president, Bassirou Diomaye Diakhar Faye. None of Faye's predecessors fully succeeded in integrating Wolof, the Senegambian lingua franca, into the national school system. The authors argue that the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) offers the current administration a powerful tool and a unique opportunity to advance this long-deferred project and to promote Wolof effectively. Building on Fallou Ngom's scholarship on Ajami literacy and Fiona McLaughlin's analyses of language policy and debate from the colonial period through Abdoulaye Wade's presidency (ending in 2012), the paper situates contemporary policy within a longer genealogy of linguistic governance and national sovereignty. After providing a historical account of the French-only policy and its educational consequences, the authors examine the ongoing coexistence and tension between French and Wolof. They conclude with a call to action that considers AI as a potential digital infrastructure capable of accelerating Wolof's integration into the formal education system.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Education, French, Language Policies, Senegal, Wolof

Introduction

The study first examines the historical background and representations of the language artifact, then analyzes how language policy has been mobilized to assert hegemony and to sustain structures of dominance and alienation in Senegal. Drawing on existing policies and languages, it further explains the imposition of French and its repercussions on the Senegalese education system. The paper addresses current developments and the coexistence of Wolof and French, culminating in discussing the implications of such policies for Senegalese education. It also interrogates the enduring legacy of these policies and the ongoing debates on the most appropriate language policies or orientations for the current administration of the newly elected President, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, who places national sovereignty at the center of his political agenda. We argue that under the current Senegalese government for whom sovereignty is a core political mantra, Wolof can gain more momentum and be formalized within broader educational settings. Such a shift could foster an economy of knowledge that transcends the cross-curricular pillars in Ajami, Wolof, and other national languages while enhancing the presence of Wolof, the Senegambian lingua franca, on the global linguistic stages. This study contributes to the scholarship on African languages and policies. We will first provide a historical account of the French-only Policy in Senegal with a strong focus on the way it came into being in Senegal. We will subsequently analyze the impact of the French-only policy on the Senegalese education system during colonization and after independence before we explore the new claims of sovereignty and perspectives/prospects of promoting Wolof. Finally, we will consider how the rise of digital infrastructures, what we call a "digital fortress," could accelerate and secure the integration of Wolof into Senegal's education system.

A Historical Account of the French-Only Policy in Senegal

To understand the history of the imposition of French and the practices used to stigmatize local languages, it is necessary to begin with France's own history. Before such measures were implemented in France's former colonies, the banning of local languages within schools and public spaces had already been practiced in metropolitan France as a means of combating the use of regional languages. According to Auger (2014), during the French Revolution of 1848, revolutionaries believed that the imposition of French served as a way to keep the lower classes under-informed, which somewhat tempered the French-only policies. She further notes that "in order to maintain unity in the country after the 1789 Revolution, one of the objectives was to 'eliminate' other languages (Breton, Occitan, etc.)" (Auger, 2014, p. 224).

Throughout the nineteenth century, successive governments undertook systematic efforts to suppress regional languages within state schools. For example, in French Brittany, students were subjected to humiliation if they were caught speaking Breton, their local language—a practice that persisted well into the twentieth century. Auger further observes that until the mid-1900s, schools and public notices explicitly warned that it was "forbidden […] to speak a regional language" (p. 224). These long-standing repressive measures demonstrate that the French-only policy did not originate in Africa; rather, it was first developed in metropolitan France and later transplanted to the colonies, leaving enduring consequences that countries like Senegal continue to confront.

Transplanted to West Africa, they produced their own emblems of control and humiliation. Among the most iconic was the sign *Ici On Parle Français* ("French is Spoken Here"), which functioned both as an invitation to speak French and as a warning against the use of African languages. Commonly displayed to advertise French classes or opportunities to converse in French—especially in regions where the language was a minority tongue—the sign also caricatured and enforced the interdiction of local languages within schools and other administrative venues in former French West African colonies.

In Francophone Africa, and particularly in Senegal, the French-only policy was imposed in schools through other violent means such as *le symbôle*. As Diallo notes, "offenders were either punished, publicly ridiculed or shamed" (p. 59). One of the most common forms of punishment, *le symbôle*—also called *le symbôlier* (Amougou, 2005)—was typically a foul or heavy object, often a large animal bone attached to a cord, that a child was forced to wear around the neck during class, in the schoolyard, and sometimes even at home. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o recalls a similar regime in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, where "one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment, three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks, or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY. Sometimes the culprits were fined money they could hardly afford" (1986, p. 11). Ngũgĩ's testimony underscores how transcolonial language policies inflicted comparable punishments across different imperial settings, shaping the enduring relationships between colonial powers and the African communities they sought to discipline and assimilate.

This pattern of linguistic domination, exemplified by practices such as *le symbôle*, did not remain a mere symbol of schoolyard humiliation. It was systematically institutionalized across French colonial territories. In Francophone West Africa, and particularly in Senegal, the colonial administration—often through French missionaries—enforced the same prohibition of local languages on school premises. During the colonial period, which lasted until 1960 when Senegal gained independence, the teaching of local languages was strictly forbidden, and French was imposed as the sole language of instruction and administration (Diallo, 2010). Because Senegal is a predominantly Muslim country, Governor Faidherbe viewed both Arabic and indigenous languages as obstacles to colonial governance, reinforcing the policy of linguistic exclusion.

It is important to note, however, that while colonial authorities worked to eradicate African languages through humiliation and punitive school practices—and later through formal policies that institutionalized French as the sole language of instruction—parallel literacies flourished beyond the colonial school and administrative sphere. Among the most significant of these was Ajami, the use of Arabic script to write African languages. As Fallou Ngom demonstrates, Ajami had deep roots in Senegal long before French colonization and embodied a vibrant intellectual tradition that stood as a countercurrent to the French-only regime. In predominantly Muslim areas, Ajami literacy rivaled French from the outset. Drawing on an extensive corpus of over 5,000 Ajami texts, Ngom identifies as the earliest Wolofal (Wolof in Ajami script) document a bilingual French–Wolof Ajami treaty negotiated between King Louis XVIII of France and the King of Bar of the Gambia in 1817 (Ngom, 2015, p. 335). This discovery, he argues, "indicates that European rulers recognised local Ajami literacies and their significance in their initial encounters with African Muslim rulers. However, as colonisation unfolded and the balance of power shifted in favour of European rulers, Ajami began to be suppressed and gradually replaced in official transactions by the Latin script, and the myth of the holistic illiteracy of Africans began to be cultivated to legitimise the colonial 'civilising mission'" (Ngom, 2015, p. 335; see also Ngom, 2023).

Despite the colonial state's eventual triumph in making French the official language of schools and administration, Ajami remained a vital medium of learning and cultural expression. Followers of major religious leaders such as Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, including Serigne Moussa Ka and Mbaye Diakhaté, sustained a rich Ajami literary tradition directed toward ordinary people. This alternative scholarship, operating outside the colonial apparatus, ensured the continuity of indigenous knowledge systems and challenged the narrative of African illiteracy on which the French "civilising mission" relied.

The Impact of the French-Only Policy on Senegalese Education

Under colonial domination, the French language was imposed in all schools and public services, and the use of local languages was not tolerated (Diallo, 2010). One of the goals of the French language policy in Senegal was to assimilate the newly colonized people. Faidherbe and his associates or administrators enforced this rule across the country with the rise of French schools. The coercive policy of making the schoolchildren speak French at all cost continued until after independence in 1960. In the nineteenth century there had been an "ephemeral attempt" to use the local language, specifically Wolof, in elementary schools. For instance, in 1817, Jean Dard opened the first school in Black Francophone Africa, in Saint-Louis, Senegal. Dard used the approach of "l'enseignement mutuel" [the reciprocal approach], a method that used one teacher for a large group of students, and promoted literacy using the local languages. Dard believed that a French-only policy would only produce "a generation of school children who may read fluently in French … without understanding a single word of what they have read" (Fall, 2014, p. 22). Initiatives like Dard's attempt to use local languages in elementary schools ended in 1841 when the French missionaries reopened the schools and restored French as the only medium of instruction. The French missionaries believed that they were on a mission to convert barbarians into Frenchmen. They considered Africans "to be without history, without any civilization worthy of the name" (Fanon, 1952/1967). As a matter of fact, the French colonization was described in French books as the *mission civilisatrice*. France was bringing civilization to the people of its colonies. The schools were, thus, the laboratories where the young Africans would be transformed into civilized Frenchmen or became "Black skins white masks" as Frantz Fanon described it in his eponymous text (Fanon, 1952/1967). However, Senegal, among all the French colonies, was the only one where the policy of assimilation was implemented significantly (Crowder, 1967).

The French policy of assimilation was marked by a fundamental contradiction: on the one hand, it drew on the revolutionary doctrine of the equality of all human beings; on the other, it rested on the conviction of European—and especially French—cultural superiority (Crowder, 1967). While African scholars and political leaders such as Léopold Sédar Senghor envisioned the twentieth century as *le rendez-vous du donner et du recevoir*, a global "meeting of giving and receiving" in which every continent would contribute uniquely to the world (Senghor, 1977), France pursued a different logic. Convinced that its *mission civilisatrice* required the imposition of French language and culture, it treated linguistic and cultural assimilation not as reciprocal exchange but as the surest means of consolidating colonial influence and of "initiating" colonized peoples into what it defined as civilization.

To achieve this goal, colonial authorities sought first to assimilate local elites. They believed that by educating the chiefs and their families, they would gain easier access to the broader indigenous population, which often resisted cooperation with the colonial regime and opposed French "civilization." Many chiefs, however, refused to send their own sons, choosing instead to dispatch children from lower social classes. In response, Governor Faidherbe opened the first école des *fils de chefs* (school for the sons of chiefs) in Saint-Louis in 1855 (Gilly & Labrune Badiane, 2023). The Church partnered closely with the colonial power in this *mission civilisatrice*, and many of the figures who would later become leaders in the pre-independence era were educated either in mission-run schools or in these specialized colonial institutions. Through this system, France effectively cultivated a class of future leaders who would carry forward a pro-French orientation after independence.

Léopold Sédar Senghor, Senegal's first president, exemplifies these tensions. Famously devoted to France—its people, its culture, and above all its language—he has been described by critics as anti-independence, a leader who accepted Senegal's sovereignty more as a concession to historical circumstances than as the fulfillment of his own political vision. In a more nuanced assessment, Ekpo argues that while Senghor's stance on decolonization shaped his early anti-nationalist politics, his passion for Africa combined with a profound attachment to French culture made him both an "unconditional Francophile" and a willing neo-colonized modernizer (Ekpo, 2010, pp. 201, 227).

Decolonization and the Continued Relevance of Colonial Education

If Senghor's policies cemented French as the language of state and education, the post-Senghor period has witnessed new pressures from below to re-center national languages, especially Wolof. After the declaration of independence in 1960, some former French colonies—including Guinea, Benin, and, to a certain extent, Burkina Faso—gave significant attention to incorporating local languages into elementary education. By contrast, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and Gabon resolutely resisted major changes in the language-in-education policy they inherited from the colonial power (Diallo, 2010).

While in power, Léopold Sédar Senghor maintained that French would remain the sole official language, the only one used in education and administration. He ensured that this requirement was written into Senegal's first constitution and reinforced it with legislation designed to preserve the dominance of French in public life (Diallo, 2010; Senghor, 1977). Yet Senghor also sought to nationalize the primary school curriculum. In a 1974 interview with journalist Robert Arnaut, he explained:

Dans la nouvelle réforme de l'enseignement à l'école primaire, chaque élève apprendra sa langue maternelle et la langue française. Sa langue maternelle, c'est-à-dire la langue la plus généralement parlée dans l'arrondissement. Je pense que le bilinguisme c'est une richesse; comme je dis on est beaucoup mieux sur ses deux jambes que sur une jambe.

[In the new primary school education reform, each student will learn their mother tongue and the French language. Their mother tongue is the most commonly spoken language in the district. I believe that bilingualism is a wealth; as I say, we are much better on both legs than on one.]

This statement underscores Senghor's conviction that linguistic duality—grounded in both national languages and French—was not a threat but a strength, even as French retained its constitutionally enshrined primacy.

Despite his efforts to nationalize and Africanize the Senegalese curriculum, Senghor remains a controversial figure in Senegalese education policy. Critics consistently argue that his policies fell short of their objectives, particularly pointing to the fact that his French language policy proved far more effective than his initiatives to promote national languages. This disparity underscores the inherent shortcomings of his approach and casts doubt on his commitment to full cultural and linguistic independence.

Senghor's administration had a lasting impact on Senegal's educational orientation. The system preserved the French legacy in the early years of independence and has continued to mirror the French model. Even though limited initiatives—such as the twenty-five pilot programs launched in October 1987 (Sylla, 1991, p. 4) and the more recent rise of bilingual schools in Dakar and Thiès—have experimented with the use of local languages in elementary education, French remains the dominant medium of instruction.

New Claims of Sovereignty and Perspectives on Promoting Wolof

Building on decades of post-independence linguistic debates, there has been a recent push toward a new paradigm shift. Wolof, the Senegalese language spoken by at least eighty-five percent of the population, has made significant breakthroughs, eroding the monopoly long enjoyed by the French language in official settings and pushing it out of many everyday domains. French is now largely confined to formal institutions, with the notable exception of some upper-middle-class families who continue to speak French at home. In contrast, Wolof has become the primary medium of communication in almost all social interactions. Even in the courts—where translation was once required because proceedings were conducted exclusively in French—Wolof is now routinely spoken, especially in departmental courthouses, despite the fact that official language laws remain unchanged. The media landscape reflects a similar shift. Many radio stations increasingly broadcast in national languages; for instance, Sud FM devotes at least sixty percent of its programming to local languages. Senegalese artists, and musicians in particular, have played a pivotal role in repositioning local languages at the center of cultural life. Through their lyrics, performances, and public influence, they have amplified the presence of Wolof and other national languages, reinforcing a broader movement that challenges the colonial linguistic hierarchy and asserts a distinctly Senegalese cultural sovereignty.

This growing linguistic shift invites a closer look at the current status of French in Senegal and at public attitudes toward the role of national languages in education. French is spoken fluently by only about twenty percent of the Senegalese population (Diallo, 2010). Despite "strenuous efforts through decrees, laws, and the constitution to protect, impose, and maintain the domination of the French language in Senegal, it continues to be marginal and elitist, and for many Senegalese, it remains a foreign language" (Diallo, 2010, p. 59). Public opinion reflects this tension: more than eighty percent of the Senegalese population believe that national languages should play a greater role in education and that they should be formally introduced into the school system (Diallo, 2010, p. 62). French has nevertheless retained the status of a language of social elevation. Whereas Horace Mann famously described schooling as "the great equalizer," in Senegal it has functioned in many respects as a means of reinventing a caste system. Although schooling has undeniably reduced traditional caste distinctions and fostered interethnic and interfaith marriages, one may contend—echoing Bowles and Gintis—that it has also created new social hierarchies and thus perpetuated inequality (Reese, 1986). In this

way, the educational system has been instrumental in sustaining the dominance of French while stigmatizing, devaluing, and perpetuating a pejorative perception of local languages. Moreover, there persists what Kazadi calls *la résistance psychologique*—psychological resistance (Kazadi, 2004, p. 309). Because local languages do not typically lead to social or economic advancement, many parents, teachers, and even some intellectuals remain reluctant to support their use in education. For this reason, Kazadi (2004) argues that local languages and the foreign languages currently used in Senegal should receive equal consideration so that both can serve and benefit their speakers (see also Kazadi, 2004, p. 312).

While debates over the status of French and the rising prominence of Wolof reveal profound shifts in Senegal's linguistic politics, an equally pressing question concerns the educational consequences of maintaining French as the primary medium of instruction. Beyond issues of identity and symbolic sovereignty, the choice of school language directly shapes learning outcomes, cognitive development, and the possibilities for social and economic transformation. Despite its status as a language of social elevation, French is not the best tool to educate young pupils. As Tsafak's (2006) study of high school students in Cameroon shows, students who used a local language at home performed better in school than those who spoke French or English at home. In the same vein, Kazadi (2004) observes that using French as the language of instruction in elementary grades has produced more trauma than benefit, leading to repetition, dropouts, failure, and the devaluation of local languages (pp. 309–312). Together, Kazadi and Tsafak confirm Cheikh Anta Diop's argument, made half a century earlier, that foreign languages pose a serious obstacle to the education of young Africans. Diop insisted that "an education in foreign languages is a waste of time because it forces learners to make a double effort to assimilate the meaning of the word and then, through a second intellectual effort, to capture the reality exposed by the word" (Diop, 1946, p. 38). In 1937, Léopold Sédar Senghor had articulated a related position in *Le problème culturel en A.O.F.* ("The Cultural Problem in Francophone West Africa"):

> Il s'agit de partir du milieu et des civilisations négro-africaines où baigne l'enfant. Celui-ci doit y apprendre à en connaître et exprimer les éléments dans sa langue maternelle d'abord, puis en français. Peu à peu, il élargira, autour de lui, le cercle de l'univers où, homme, il sera engagé demain. [The idea is to start with the environment and the African civilizations in which the child is immersed. The child must learn about these civilizations and express what they have learned first in their mother tongue, then in French. Gradually, they will expand the universe around them, in which they will be involved as adults tomorrow.] (Senghor, 1964, p. 14).

Such converging perspectives underscore a broader conviction, expressed by Mamadou Dia, that "we must really decolonize ourselves to our innermost hearts and not merely at the level of appearances" (as cited in Crowder, 1967, p. 114). This spirit is forcefully renewed by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Boubacar Boris Diop, who, in a recent open letter to Senegal's president Diomaye Faye, congratulate the newly elected leader and underline that solving the "linguistic puzzle" is a prerequisite for any economic, political, social, or cultural transformation. They outline seven key recommendations:

1. Emphasize the importance of Senegalese languages as the foundation of a new Senegal, affirming every citizen's right to respect for their mother tongue and prioritizing these languages in policy.
2. Create a national interpretation and translation center to foster exchange among Senegalese languages and between them and other African and world languages.
3. Encourage the president to speak to his people in their own languages and to use those languages, with interpreters, in international forums—while repealing Article 28 of the Constitution, which requires presidential candidates to be fluent in French.
4. Organize and empower farmers and workers to foster creativity and secure their engagement.

5. Make the works of influential Senegalese authors and progressive world literature available in Senegalese languages and integrate them into the education system.
6. Prioritize Senegal's own development and education, then extend cooperation to Africa, Asia, and Latin America before turning to Europe.
7. Disregard resistance from intellectual elites in order to advance national progress through language and education (Open letter to President Bassirou D. D. Faye, 2024).

These proposals collectively affirm that linguistic emancipation is central to economic and cultural sovereignty. Paulin G. Djité reinforces this perspective in *The Sociolinguistics of Development in Africa*, where he identifies education, health, the economy, and governance as four foundational areas of development that depend on the vitality of African languages (Djité, 2008, pp. 1–2). He stresses that "development is much more than economic growth; it is viable only when it seeks to allow speech communities to realize their full potential and when it endorses and respects linguistic and cultural pluralism" (Djité, 2008, p. 11). Building on Ali Mazrui, Djité adds that "the linguistic quest for liberation must seek to promote African languages, especially in academia, as one of the strategies for promoting greater intellectual and scientific independence from the West" (as cited in Djité, 2008; see also Mazrui & Kaba, 2016, p. 32). For all these reasons, breaking the cycle of linguistic dependency requires training a new generation to build and sustain a linguistic economy rooted in Senegalese national languages. This longstanding tension now meets a new frontier in the digital age

The Digital Fortress and the Struggle for Linguistic Sovereignty

Building on the preceding analysis of colonial legacies and current language debates, the digital sphere emerges as the next decisive frontier in Senegal's pursuit of linguistic sovereignty. The idea of a "digital fortress" refers to the set of digital infrastructures, most critically, artificial intelligence (AI), capable of accelerating and safeguarding the integration of Wolof within Senegal's educational and cultural systems. This concept acquires particular urgency in light of the global dominance of GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon). The concentration of digital infrastructures in the hands of these corporations raises profound concerns about cultural and linguistic autonomy across Africa, especially in Francophone contries states like Senegal. By leaving technological development largely to transnational actors, African nations risk becoming consumers of imported systems rather than producers of knowledge grounded in local epistemologies. Constructing a digital fortress is therefore not merely an exercise in technological innovation; it is, fundamentally, a question of cultural survival, ensuring that languages such as Wolof are not erased by the homogenizing pressures of global digital platforms.

Language lies at the core of this struggle. As Paulin G. Djité reminds us, development must be measured by improvements in daily life rather than by conformity to external technocratic models (2008). Yet African education systems, dominated by foreign languages, continue to exclude many citizens from meaningful social, political, and economic participation. Despite public rhetoric in favor of sovereignty, Senegalese governments in recent years have deepened dependency by expanding English-medium instruction in primary schools—a move that sidelines national languages and entrenches structural inequality (Diagne, 2011). Such reforms reproduce what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) calls the "cultural bomb," privileging imported models of progress while undermining indigenous knowledge.

The paradox becomes stark when contrasted with France's own protectionist linguistic policies. The 1994 loi Toubon mandated French in official documents and penalized companies that failed to comply, thereby securing linguistic sovereignty against Anglophone influence (Djité, 2008). Few African states, despite having

arguably greater stakes in protecting their languages, have adopted comparable measures. The consequence is a recurring cycle in which African knowledge systems are undervalued at home but studied, codified, and monetized abroad.

Senegal's Ajami literacy traditions illustrate both the resilience of African languages and the cost of their exclusion from formal education. Fallou Ngom (2015, 2023) has documented a rich corpus of Wolofal—Wolof written in Arabic script—that for centuries supported cultural, religious, and economic life outside French colonial frameworks. Ajami's persistence demonstrates that African languages have long sustained intellectual traditions parallel to the colonial school system, a fact that complicates narratives of illiteracy and underscores the possibilities of linguistic sovereignty in the digital era. Yet after independence, educational policy privileged French and, more recently, English—languages spoken fluently by only a minority of Senegalese citizens (Diallo, 2010). Ironically, Wolof now has a recognized place in elite American universities such as Harvard, Columbia, and University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, while remaining marginal in Senegal's own classrooms. This epistemic paradox underscores how Africa can become a linguistic testing ground for external institutions even as it neglects its own intellectual capital.

Constructing a digital fortress thus means both resisting external monopolies and investing in local infrastructures that elevate African languages. AI creates unique opportunities in this area: Wolof speech-recognition tools, digital certification systems, and continent-wide linguistic technologies could transform education and knowledge production. Regional coordination—akin to ECOWAS in the economic sphere—could facilitate the standardization of African language curricula, translation networks, and shared digital repositories. Such strategies would not isolate Africa but rather enable it to engage with the global system on its own terms.

The symbolic weight of African languages is already visible internationally. When King Charles extended Independence Day greetings and French President Emmanuel Macron welcomed Senegal's fifth president in Wolof on X (formerly Twitter), these gestures underscored a broader shift that acknowledges African languages as credible and respected instruments of diplomacy (Charles, 2024; Macron, 2024).

(Charles, 2024, image)

(Macron, 2024, image)

Digital sovereignty cannot be separated from linguistic sovereignty. Without deliberate policy interventions embedding national languages into digital infrastructures, African nations risk reproducing the very dependencies they claim to resist. In this context, the "digital fortress" is not a metaphor but a necessary architecture for decolonizing knowledge, protecting cultural identity, and allowing Africans to narrate their own histories in their own tongues. Without such measures, Senegal will continue to perpetuate the dependency it seeks to overcome. A digital fortress grounded in local languages thus becomes both a cultural imperative and a developmental necessity, ensuring that African societies retain control over the production and circulation of knowledge in the digital era. Recent technological advances underscore this urgency. In September 2024, Google launched a Wolof translation model, followed shortly by YouTube's introduction of Wolof closed captions in standardized orthography. Around the same period, Alioune Badara Mbengue introduced *Awa*, a Wolof-speaking AI system still under development. These innovations reveal both the possibilities and vulnerabilities facing African languages in the digital age. Limited research and funding place these languages at a structural disadvantage compared to global ones. However, AI provides a pathway to reverse this imbalance by enabling native speakers to shape the future of their languages. Through AI, African languages can gain visibility, achieve greater standardization, and receive stronger pedagogical support, thereby strengthening both cultural preservation and national development. In this light, AI is not merely a technical tool but a framework for reclaiming agency over Africa's linguistic future.

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African Languages and the Ecologies of Knowledge in the United States' Midwestern Universities

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Abstract

This article examines the crucial role of African languages in knowledge production within the context of Midwestern US universities. It argues that the current positioning of African languages within these institutions, often reduced them as "foreign" or "critical" undermines their potential to contribute meaningfully to diverse knowledge systems. The study challenges the dominant epistemological structures that privilege Western languages and explores how educational institutions can actively participate in decolonizing knowledge production by embracing African languages in education systems. The article draws on a qualitative case study of African language programs in Midwestern universities, including interviews with program coordinators, directors, and instructors. The findings reveal the motivations and challenges associated with implementing these programs. While institutions recognize the strategic importance of African languages, they often prioritize enrollment numbers and funding opportunities over fostering genuine cultural understanding and knowledge exchange. The study also analyzes the impact of K-12 language policies, funding dynamics, and the politics of language categorization on the viability and effectiveness of African language programs. This article contributes to ecologies of knowledge by demonstrating how the marginalization of African languages perpetuates epistemic injustice. It advocates for a shift in institutional practices and policies towards recognizing African languages as valuable resources for knowledge production, dissemination, and preservation. It proposes concrete recommendations for universities to integrate African languages more centrally into their curricula, and system. By centering African languages agency, this article provides a pathway for educational institutions to become active participants in fostering more equitable and inclusive ecologies of knowledge.

Keywords: Language Ideology, Language Policy, Positioning, Marginalization, Strategic Importance[1]

Introduction

African languages are not merely instruments of communication; they are carriers of epistemologies, archives of memory, and infrastructures of knowledge production. Yet within global academia and particularly in the United States, African languages are routinely positioned through categorical labels such as *foreign* or *critical*, designations that shape policy, funding, curricular design, and student demand. These labels do more than classify; they participate in epistemic ordering, conferring visibility and value on

1 This article is from a Master of Arts thesis titled «POSITIONING 'FOREIGN' OR 'CRITICAL' LANGUAGES IN THE US: A CASE STUDY OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES PROGRAMING IN MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITIES» by Paul Onesmus Ntinda, submitted in June 2024 at Indiana University. The thesis examines how African languages (specifically Swahili, Yoruba, Bamanakan, and Hausa) are positioned within the «foreign» or «critical» language frameworks in Midwestern US universities. It explores the motivations, challenges, and opportunities related to these programs, using Language Ideology Theory and Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital. The research methodology is qualitative, involving interviews with program coordinators, directors, and instructors. This paper has already been presented at the conference: The Inaugural First Conference on Global Indigenous Studies from Multiple Perspectives, Indiana University Bloomington, November 15 – 17, 2024. Global Indigenous Studies Network, Hamilton Lugar School of Global & International Studies.

some knowledge while marginalizing others. This article asks how such positioning affects not only program viability in Midwestern U.S. universities but also broader efforts to decolonize knowledge and to sustain plural, relational ecologies of knowledge.

I situate the study at the intersection of language policy and ideology, drawing on Language Ideology Theory and Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to examine how institutional logics—enrollment metrics, funding streams, national-security priorities—mediate the status of African languages. Emphasis on "critical" languages can open resources and opportunities; it can also instrumentalize African languages for extra-academic objectives, thereby constraining their intellectual horizons. Conversely, the catch-all category of "foreign" may flatten profound differences among languages and obscure their roles as vehicles of indigenous knowledge and scholarly production. Read together, these framings shape who learns African languages, why they learn them, and what forms of scholarship become thinkable.

Empirically, the article analyzes a qualitative case study of Swahili, Yoruba, Bamanakan, and Hausa programs at Midwestern universities. Through interviews with coordinators, directors, and instructors, I examine (1) the rationales for adopting African language programs, (2) the challenges and opportunities encountered in their implementation, and (3) the effects of *foreign*/*critical* designations on program sustainability, pedagogy, and student trajectories. Special attention is given to pipeline issues—especially the paucity of K–12 exposure—and to the "funding game" through which institutions align their terminology with external priorities.

The contribution is twofold. Substantively, the study shows how language labels and policy architectures organize access to African languages, shaping who accrues linguistic and cultural capital and to what ends. Conceptually, it reframes African language teaching as a site of knowledge production rather than peripheral skill acquisition: integrating these languages centrally into curricula expands the archive of concepts, genres, and interpretive frameworks available to scholars and students. In this sense, strengthening African language programs is not only a matter of curricular equity but a precondition for advancing rigorous, multilingual scholarship on Africa and from Africa.

The article proceeds as follows. I first contextualize the study within U.S. and African language-policy landscapes and outline the theoretical framework. I then present the methodology and case context. The findings analyze motivations, constraints, and the effects of *foreign*/*critical* positioning. I conclude with implications for African higher education and U.S. institutions, offering policy and curricular recommendations aimed at fostering more inclusive, durable, and intellectually generative ecologies of knowledge.

Contextualizing Language Policy and Ideology.

The positioning of African languages is deeply intertwined with historical and contemporary power dynamics in both the U.S. and African contexts. In the U.S., the historical dominance of an "English-only" ideology has shaped language policy and public attitudes, often leading to the marginalization of languages other than English (Wiley, 2014; Wiley & Lukes, 1996). This monolingual bias is reflected in the education system, where foreign language education has often been viewed as an optional supplement rather than a core component of a comprehensive education (Ntinda, 2024). The rise of "critical language" initiatives, driven primarily by national security concerns following events such as 9/11, has created a hierarchy of languages, prioritizing some for strategic reasons while leaving others under-resourced (Higgott, 2004; Sterniak, 2008). This dynamic is mirrored in Africa, where the legacy of colonialism has left a complex linguistic landscape. European languages (English, French, Portuguese) often occupy positions of power in government, education, and the media, while indigenous languages are relegated to a lower status despite being spoken by the majority of the population (Bamgbose, 2011; Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998). This linguistic hierarchy not only hinders access to education and opportunities for many Africans but also contributes to the erosion of cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge systems.

Taken together, these parallel histories in the U.S. and Africa create a global context where language policy is not merely administrative but deeply ideological. The marginalization of African languages—whether through monolingual U.S. policies or colonial legacies in Africa—is a form of epistemic injustice. It positions these languages and the worldviews they carry as peripheral to dominant Western knowledge systems. This study argues that the very act of labeling African languages as 'foreign' or 'critical' within U.S. universities is a continuation of this ideological work. Such designations are not neutral; they actively shape which knowledge is valued, funded, and integrated into the academic landscape, thereby directly impacting efforts to decolonize curricula and foster more equitable ecologies of knowledge.

To understand how this process unfolds, it is crucial to first examine the specific language ideologies and terminologies that govern language education in the United States. According to Wiley and Lukes (1996), the prevailing perception of linguistic diversity in the United States has been shaped primarily by two dominant language ideologies: monolingual ideology and standard language ideolog**y**. Both are tied to assumptions about national unity and socioeconomic mobility and have provided the conceptual framework for language policy and the context in which language teachers work. These ideologies have profoundly influenced language education policy. The terms *foreign* and *critical*, which describe how languages are perceived, categorized, defined, named, or valued within specific educational, socio-cultural, or geopolitical contexts, are closely connected to such policies. They affect academic programs and government initiatives, and thus are central to the concept of *positioning* as applied in this study.

Examining how dictionaries define the term 'foreign' reveals that no definition is fully exhaustive. Broadly, foreign refers to something that is not indigenous to a particular plase–something that is not entirely or truly at home there (Anderson, 2022). A foreign language can therefore be understood as a language that is not the indigenous language of a specific country or region. For instance, foreign languages are commonly acquired as supplementary languages, acknowledging that they are not the predominant languages spoken in a particular area. Historically, however, "foreign language instruction has been designed for the academic privileged who are anticipated to pursue advanced degrees" (Wiley & Lukes, 1996, p. 512). By contrast,'critical' (languages) refer to languages that are considered strategically significant due to factors such as national security, diplomacy, economic interests, or cultural interaction (Hanhimäki, 2006). Governments or educational institutions may therefore 'provide greater importance' (positioning) to the instruction and acquisition of 'critical languages' in order to satisfy specific requirements and objectives. Yet this prioritization can result in the marginalization of other languages, producing what Jiménez and Adrada-Rafael (2021, p. 4) describe as "stigmatized and subordinated" status. In this way, politics and social hierarchies are embodied, reproduced, and naturalized through the very designation of certain languages as critical.

It is in this vein that, in the United States, languages such as Spanish or French are commonly classified as foreign languages, whereas languages like Swahili, Arabic, Chinese, or Russian may be categorized as critical languages due to their geopolitical significance (Higgott, 2004). In addition, it is worth noting that the speakers of these languages have been living in the US for centuries, rather than just solely consisting of recent immigrants like in the case of Spanish. Contrary to popular belief, colleges in an academic setting have the ability to provide programs in a wide range of foreign languages. For instance, more than 70% of "American students can attain advanced or professional levels of proficiency in a foreign language by the time they graduate from college by enrolling in standards-based language courses at their home university together with a year of integrated study abroad" (American Academy of Arts & Science, 2016, p. 18). Additionally, they have the option to create specialized programs that concentrate on vital languages. The objective of these programs is to train individuals to become specialists in these languages, specifically for purposes related to intelligence, diplomacy, or business.

Nevertheless, the term 'foreign' is problematic and ambiguous in and of itself. The demarcation between minority, heritage, and foreign languages is frequently ambiguous in numerous contexts. Foreign languages attempt to influence specific discourses, beliefs, and attitudes that lead to the emergence and dominance of those languages (Pavlenko, 2003), while others remain entangled in the dichotomy between common language and uncommon languages that are considered 'foreign' or 'critical.' Therefore, it is this ambiguity of the term itself 'foreign' the issue of positioning languages, to get the 'foreign language' calls for the investigation of the policy and educational issues, forces, and actors involved in the implementation of foreign language in reflection to the UN's core value.

The implications of this can have a significant effect on educational policies, as well as on motivation to promote cultural diversity, raise awareness, encourage conversation between civilizations, and acknowledge the importance of developing multilingualism, particularly in global education. For example, governments have the authority to distribute resources, develop educational programs, and offer rewards to encourage the acquisition of foreign or critical languages. Furthermore, the categorization of specific languages as critical may be linked to worries regarding national security, resulting in efforts to educate personnel who are skilled in such languages to tackle geopolitical obstacles. This perspective on language has consequences for how we understand the status of language. This means positioning has to do with the status of the language, "status refers to the perceived value of a designated language, particularly in terms of its social usefulness and market worth as a means of communication. It also includes subjective aspects influenced by a society's linguistic culture" (Ricento, 2005, p. 5).

In this light, foreign languages, including critical ones, are frequently studied for cultural enrichment. However, critical languages receive special attention due to their role in promoting international relations and communication in important domains. From this vantage point, the study will investigate the ways in which this placement might be detrimental to African languages catalogued as such, and, more significantly, the reasons and goals for adopting or programming African languages, as well as the difficulties and possibilities of implementing such programs within the specified role.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis is informed by two interconnected theoretical frameworks, Language Ideology Theory and Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital.

Language Ideology Theory

Language ideologies refer to the beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions that individuals and societies hold about languages and their speakers (Seargeant, 2009; Woolard, 2020; Kroskrity, 2004). These ideologies are not neutral; they are often tied to power dynamics and social hierarchies, influencing language policy, educational practices, and personal language choices. In the U.S., for example, the dominant «English-only» ideology has shaped public attitudes toward bilingualism and the perceived value of learning other languages (Wiley, 2014). Similarly, in Africa, colonial language ideologies continue to affect the status and use of indigenous languages, often prioritizing European languages in education and governance (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998). By analyzing the language ideologies present within U.S. universities, we can better understand the factors that either support or hinder the inclusion and success of African language programs.

Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital.

Pierre Bourdieu, a renowned French sociologist, introduced two significant theoretical concepts: Cultural Capital and Habitus. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is primarily acquired during an individual's early education and is subconsciously shaped by their environment. The link of economic capital, social capital,

and cultural capital is transformative but irreplaceable. For instance, "A person who grows up in a wealthy family could be more easily offered an opportunity to study abroad and gain some valuable qualifications and experience. This advantage can be seen as a form of cultural capital". The scenario elucidates how cultural capital can be converted into economic capital. This example illustrates the interdependent connection between economic, social, and cultural capital (Huang, 2019, p. 45).

In addition to language ideologies, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital refers to the non-financial social assets individuals acquire, such as education, knowledge, and linguistic competence, which can provide access to power and opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986; Schirato & Danaher, 2020). In the context of language learning, proficiency in certain languages—particularly those associated with prestige and influence—can be a significant advantage. Understanding this concept helps us see how learning African languages can be strategically valuable for students, enhancing their academic profiles, career opportunities, and intercultural understanding. However, it also raises important questions about equity and access—who has the opportunity to acquire this form of cultural capital, and how can institutions ensure that African languages are recognized, valued, and adequately supported as legitimate forms of knowledge?

Methodology and the Approach

The findings presented in this article are drawn from a qualitative case study conducted at public universities in the Midwestern United States. These institutions were selected for their established African language programs and their location in a region with significant immigrant populations. The study employed a purposive sampling method (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Patton, 2002; Palinkas et al., 2015) to recruit participants with diverse roles and experiences related to African language education.

The primary data collection method for this study was semi-structured interviews (Roulston, 2019; Mirhosseini, 2020) conducted with key stakeholders involved in African language programs. These included program coordinators, responsible for day-to-day administration and curriculum development; program directors, faculty members overseeing the strategic direction of language programs within African Studies centers or departments; and language instructors, who provided insights into pedagogical practices, student motivations, and classroom challenges. In total, five interviews were conducted across two Midwestern universities.

The interview protocol was created to explore participants' perspectives on several critical areas, including the rationale for adopting African language programs, the challenges and opportunities in implementation, and the impact of designating these languages as «foreign» or «critical» on funding and student enrollment. Additionally, participants shared their views on language policy and the broader role of African languages in U.S. higher education.

To ensure accuracy, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using Transkriptor software (Transkriptor, 2024). Thematic analysis was conducted using MAXQDA software (VERBI Software, 2024), a widely used computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) (Leavy, 2022; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015; Silver, 2010). The data analysis followed a multi-stage coding process informed by grounded theory principles (Bordia, 2015; Khandkar, 2009; Bradley et al., 2007). First, open coding was used to identify key concepts, themes, and patterns within the transcripts. Then, axial coding was applied to explore relationships between categories and subcategories, identifying connections and contradictions in the data. Finally, selective coding was used to refine core categories and integrate them into a coherent theoretical framework.

The use of MAXQDA facilitated the systematic organization, coding, and analysis of qualitative data, allowing for the identification of recurring themes, co-occurrences, and relationships between concepts. The findings presented in this study are based on this rigorous analysis, with illustrative quotes from the interviews providing rich contextual detail.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis revealed a complex interplay of factors influencing the positioning and implementation of African language programs in Midwestern U.S. universities. The findings are organized around three key themes, corresponding to the research questions, which will be discussed in detail below.

Motivations for Adopting African Language Programs

The decision to offer African language programs was influenced by a combination of strategic, institutional, and pedagogical factors. Universities recognized the growing geopolitical and economic importance of Africa and the need to prepare students for meaningful engagement with the continent. As a result, proficiency in African languages became a key asset for students pursuing careers in diplomacy, international development, business, and research related to Africa. Additionally, this initiative aligns with the broader U.S. government emphasis on «critical languages» for national security and economic competitiveness (Kuenzi, 2008). By offering these programs, institutions aimed to equip students with the linguistic and cultural competencies necessary for professional success in an increasingly interconnected world.

> I mean, I think a lot of what I just said applies at the institutional level, particularly the competition in the workforce. We don't get specific funding from the state level for language, but, you know, we do get a lot of our funding from the state. And as the state [...] moves towards, there are particular policy decisions at the state level that are being made about higher education and particularly around diversity, equity and inclusion and what is considered acceptable to teach in a university. I think that will increasingly make the administration at (University) broadly think twice about what we offer and how we. And what we're able to include and how we frame it (Interview 1, April 2, 2024).

Furthermore, offering a diverse range of Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs), including African languages, has strengthened the university's reputation and academic appeal. By expanding language offerings, the institution has been able to attract students and faculty with specialized interests in African Studies, fostering a more competitive and intellectually diverse environment. This has been particularly beneficial for universities that host Title VI National Resource Centers, as federal funding supports area studies and language programs, further enhancing the institution's commitment to global education and research.

> «That less commonly taught angle makes us kind of more competitive. There's a benefit to the institution to teach these less commonly taught languages because it helps us attract students and faculty to teach them. I mean, this is really crass, but there's, like, a marketing and element to that.» (Interview 1, April 2, 2024)

Not only (LCTLs) has been seen as way to strengthen the university's reputation and academic appeal, but also critical language hierarchies eclipse the increase of student demand and heritage connections with African languages. The increasing student interest in African languages has been significantly influenced by heritage connections, however, programs such as the study abroad opportunities, and career aspirations has been overshadowed by the geopolitical factors and global priorities. Many students are motivated to learn these languages to reconnect with their cultural roots. Moreover, the presence of African diaspora communities in the Midwest has further contributed to this demand, fostering a growing appreciation for linguistic and cultural diversity in higher education. But, these Student Demand and Heritage Connection motivations is always hindered by the critical language hierarchies.

> «So, learning the language is like, you have access to them. Well, all of our African languages actually are on the critical language list, but then there are those that are considered more critical» (Interview 4, March 26, 2024).

Similarly, the security strategic regions such as the Sahel region in Africa prompted the adoption and categorization of Bamana language as critical language.

> «So, Bamana, because of the events that are going on in the Sahel region, Bamana becomes a critical language. It is a trade language, and so it is interchangeable or mutually intelligible with a number of other Mande languages in the Sahel» (Interview 5, March 28, 2024).

In this purview, the classification of African languages as «critical» plays a significant role in shaping their visibility and demand in higher education. As noted in the interviews, while all African languages on offer are categorized as critical languages, some are perceived as more critical than others due to geopolitical factors and global priorities (Interview 4, March 26, 2024). This hierarchical classification influences funding allocations, language program sustainability, and student enrollment.

A clear example of this dynamic is the designation of Bamana as a critical language, particularly in response to ongoing events in the Sahel region (Interview 5, March 28, 2024). Bamana's status as a trade language and its mutual intelligibility with other Mandé languages further reinforce its strategic importance and less or none of linguistic and cultural needs. These findings highlight how language classifications are not static but rather influenced by political, economic, and security considerations. This also suggests that students' access to African languages may be shaped by shifting global narratives rather than purely linguistic or cultural interests. Therefore, language educators and policymakers must critically assess these designations to ensure that African language programs remain inclusive, well-supported, and aligned with both student needs and broader linguistic preservation efforts.

Another motivation was the desire to bridge African language gaps. Nevertheless, interviews highlight a critical gap in foreign language instruction, particularly at the K-12 level, where African languages remain largely absent from curricula. One participant emphasized that African languages are an integral part of foreign language education, arguing that their exclusion creates an incomplete linguistic framework. While languages such as Spanish are widely taught in K-12 education, African languages receive minimal institutional support, limiting exposure and access for students interested in linguistic and cultural diversity.

> «But when you look at it from the lens of the need, it is critical to the institution, it is critical for students, it is also critical for foreign language instruction as a whole, because foreign language instruction would not be complete when you remove Africa, because Africa is not a part of that, foreigners, it is a part of it. While we have Spanish in K through twelve education, we barely have any institution that teaches African languages at the k through twelve level» (Interview 3, April 9, 2024).

This finding underscores the institutional barriers that prevent African languages from gaining the same recognition as other world languages, despite their relevance to global studies, heritage connections, and academic enrichment. Addressing this disparity requires greater institutional commitment, policy changes, and investment in resources to expand African language programs at all educational levels. This was evidenced by the figure bellow.

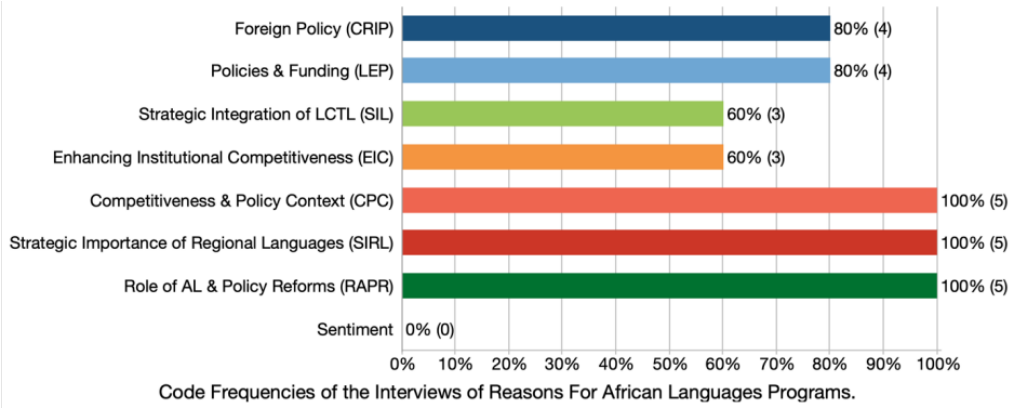

Figure 1. Five Interviews Showing Reasons for African Languages Programs in US Midwestern Universities

Figure 1 provides valuable insights into the reasons behind African languages programs in US Midwestern universities, based on the frequency of code-themes from five interviews. The data is grouped into four main categories: High Consensus Reasons, Moderate Consensus Reasons, Selective Consensus Reasons, and Sentiment Analysis. High Consensus Reasons show unanimous agreement among interviewees on the importance of Competitiveness & Policy Context, Strategic Importance of Regional Languages, and the Role of Graduate Student Instructors. This strong consensus underscores the critical nature of these factors in supporting African languages programs.

Moderate Consensus Reasons, such as Critical Languages Policy and Policies & Funding, were found in 80% of the interviews, indicating substantial agreement on their significance, though with some variation in perceived priority. Selective Consensus Reasons, including Strategic Integration of Less Commonly Taught Languages and Enhancing Institutional Competitiveness, were mentioned by 60% of interviewees, suggesting these factors are valued but may not be universally prioritized. Interestingly, sentiment was not a factor in these interviews, indicating a focus on practical and strategic considerations rather than emotional responses.

This analysis highlights the pivotal areas for African languages programs and can guide policymakers and educators in prioritizing development and support efforts. These motivations highlight the multifaceted value of African language programs, extending beyond purely academic considerations to encompass strategic, economic, and social dimensions.

Challenges and Opportunities in Implementation

Despite the compelling motivations for offering African language programs, their implementation faced numerous challenges. One of these challenges is, funding constraints and resource allocation**:** Securing adequate funding was a persistent challenge, particularly for LCTLs that often have lower enrollments compared to more commonly taught European languages (Ntinda, ٢٠٢٤). Competition for limited resources within universities and the dependence on external funding sources, such as Title VI grants, created uncertainty and instability.

> «But in general, I can say that over time, less federal funds have been designated to foreign language and area studies. And that hurts us as a school because we are then unable to pay our teachers and offer the breadth of language training that we want to be offering. As funding is moved away from foreign language and area studies, that hurts us and what we're able to do» (Interview 1, April 2, 2024).

In addition, language policy and institutional priorities pose significant challenges to the implementation of African languages programs in midwestern universities. The lack of a comprehensive national language policy in the US, coupled with the historical dominance of an «English-only» ideology, created an environment where African languages often struggled for recognition and support (Wiley, 2014). Institutional priorities, such as enrollment numbers, sometimes conflicted with the ideological commitment to promoting linguistic diversity. This is evidenced by some of the interviewees, one of whom is noted below.

> «I don't know, I would imagine and hope that at the high school level there's a few more languages being taught, but it's probably typically, it's like Spanish, French, and German, sometimes Chinese. And so, if we're thinking about kind of the pipeline into university, many of our, you know, there's sort of two ways to think about it. One is that students who are coming in, having already studied one of these commonly taught languages, many students will just continue to study that language because it's what they know. And many students who come into [our university], into the College of Arts and Sciences, can actually, if they have, if they're proficient enough in one of these languages, they can test out of the language requirement. So, on the one hand, we can say that studying these commonly taught languages either pushes them into continuing to study that language or testing out of it» (Interview 2, April 1, 2024).

In a similar vein, data shows that the limited availability of African language instruction in K-12 education created a significant challenge for higher education institutions. The result is that students often arrived at university with no prior exposure to these languages, making it difficult to build robust and sustainable programs at the college level. As far as the lack of African language instruction in K-12 and even higher education (K-16) is concerned, respondents argue that the current foreign language curriculum is outdated and call for a significant shift in education policy to better align K-12 schooling with contemporary needs.

> «We need people who can speak this language, or we need people who are familiar with these world regions. But that has that translated down to K through 12 or even K through 16 across the US. No! So, the foreign language languages that we teach in our schools, I think are very dated. Very dated. We need a change in education policy that affects k through twelve schooling and that has not been done yet» (Interview 5, March 26, 2024).

Furthermore, the issue of Language Bias and Prioritization has significant implication for the implementations of African languages programs. Data revealed that the implicit biases and the prioritization of certain languages (often European) over others have created an unequal playing field, influencing student perceptions and enrollment choices The designation of "critical language," intended to support specific languages, could inadvertently reinforce existing hierarchies.

The research, however, highlights the multifaceted challenges and opportunities that African language programs face. It underscores the importance of understanding and managing the interplay of foreign policy management and critical languages. Additionally, it points out the need for tailored strategies to navigate practical constraints such as K-12 language policy and funding dynamics. The unanimous recognition of factors like shifting dynamics in foreign language education, critical language dilemmas, facets of language education, language bias and prioritization, language prioritization and eligibility, and K-12 & language enrollment trends underscores their importance.

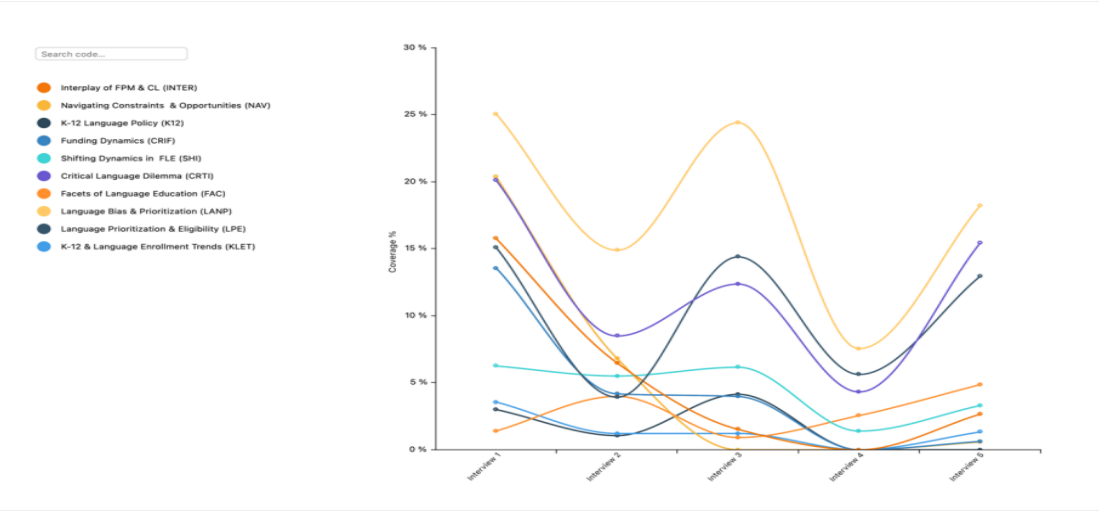

Figure 2. Theme trends Across Five Interviews Challenges and Opportunities for African Languages Programs in US Midwestern Universities.

Figure 2 illustrates theme trends coverage percentages across five interviewees. The key themes or codes include Interplay of Funding, Policy, Multilingualism, & Critical Languages (FPM & CL(INTER)), Navigating Constraints & Opportunities (NAV), K-12 Language Policy (K12), Funding Dynamics (CRIF), Shifting Dynamics in Foreign Language Education (FLE (SHI)), Critical Language Dilemma (CRTI), Facets of Language Education (FAC), Language Bias & Prioritization (LANP), Language Prioritization & Eligibility (LPE), and K-12 & Language Enrollment Trends (KLET). Figure 9 broadly summarizes the trends of the major codes across the five interviews. Interplay of Funding, Policy, Multilingualism, & Critical Languages (FPM & CL(INTER)) is initially very significant but becomes less emphasized in later interviews, suggesting an initial strong focus that shifts over time. Meanwhile, Navigating Constraints & Opportunities (NAV) shows consistent importance with significant peaks, indicating ongoing discussions about navigating challenges and leveraging opportunities.

These insights provide a nuanced understanding of the key themes discussed by interviewees and can guide targeted strategies to support and adopt to present challenges and opportunities in the implementation and enhancement of African languages programs effectively. Also, highlight the key challenges and opportunities associated with the labels and roles assigned to these languages, which will be further unpacked in subsequent discussion sections. Apart from that these findings can guide stakeholders in identifying and addressing the most critical challenges and opportunities for African language programs, ensuring a strategic and comprehensive approach to their development and sustainability.

Nevertheless, data shows that, from these challenges, several opportunities have emerged for African language programs. Strategic partnerships and collaborations with other departments, institutions, and organizations, including African universities and diaspora communities, could significantly enhance program visibility, resource sharing, and student recruitment. Leveraging technology to offer virtual classes can also expand access and engagement. Additionally, developing innovative and engaging curricula that integrate African languages into broader interdisciplinary programs, such as African Studies, International Relations, and Global Health, could attract a wider range of students.

Advocacy and outreach efforts are crucial in raising awareness of the value of African languages for career development, cultural understanding, and global citizenship. By highlighting these benefits, perceptions can shift, leading to increased student interest and enrollment. These strategies collectively offer a comprehensive approach to overcoming challenges and maximizing the potential of African language programs.

Impact of the Labels/ Designation of «Foreign» or «Critical»

The «critical» language designation/label or positioning, primarily driven by U.S. national security interests, often grants access to significant funding and resources, exemplified by Title VI and FLAS fellowships (Kuenzi, 2008). However, this designation also introduces a potential challenge: a disconnect between national priorities and student interests. This misalignment can result in low enrollment in certain programs, even when those programs are deemed strategically important from a national security perspective. This sets the stage for a complex discussion regarding the balance between national needs and individual motivations in the field of language education.

According to Interview 3 (April 9, 2024), «less commonly taught languages» (LCTLs) are defined within the context of U.S. foreign language education. Data indicated that these languages, while not mainstream in the U.S., are deemed important for international education, economic development, business, research, and career opportunities for American citizens.

> It means that they are not the mainstream language of the United States, but they are languages that the United States have identified as foreign languages , and they are important for international education, economic development, business access, research, and career advancement for, I mean, American students or American citizens. But within this categorization, some languages are called the critical languages. And these critical languages are languages that are directly tied to the national goal of the United States. And if you want to map out this goal, I think I already touched on them first is the national security of the nation, and that is where Swahili, Wolof, and Arabic comes in as less commonly taught language. And I think to an extent, when you think about the middle eastern part of Africa right there, these languages like Swahili and Arabic are part of the languages that attacked Islamic, you know. (Interview 3, April 9, 2024)

Crucially, the Interview 3 (April 9, 2024) further distinguishes «critical languages» as a subset of LCTLs that are directly linked to U.S. national goals. The primary goal identified is national security, with Swahili, Wolof, and Arabic specifically mentioned as examples. The interview connects these languages to regions of strategic importance, particularly the Middle East and parts of Africa, and suggests a link between these languages and understanding Islamic cultures, likely in the context of national security concerns.

On the other hand, the «critical» designation could inadvertently reinforce a narrow, instrumental view of language learning, focusing on security and intelligence applications rather than broader cultural and intellectual benefits. This raises ethical considerations about the framing and purpose of language education.

Therefore, given the initial challenge of balancing national priorities with student interests, the analysis underscores the U.S. government's strategic approach to language education. This approach prioritizes languages that serve national interests, particularly in security and international relations, as evidenced by the «critical» language designation and associated funding. Ultimately, the evidence suggests that language learning is viewed not merely as an academic endeavor, but as a strategic tool for achieving broader geopolitical objectives, reflecting a pragmatic and security-conscious perspective on language education policy.

Similarly, The broader «foreign» language label, while encompassing a wider range of languages, could contribute to the marginalization of African languages by placing them in a category often perceived as less relevant or prestigious than more commonly taught European languages (Anderson, 2022). This perception could be further exacerbated by implicit biases and the historical dominance of European languages in the Western academic canon. The same os evidenced by interview data.

> «But in general, I can say that over time, less federal funds have been designated to foreign language and area studies. And that hurts us as a school because we are then unable to pay our teachers and offer the breadth of language training that we want to be offering. As funding is moved away from foreign language and area studies, that hurts us and what we're able to do» (Interview 1, April 2, 2024).

Therefore, the «foreign» language label, while seemingly inclusive, can inadvertently contribute to the marginalization of African languages. By categorizing them alongside all non-English languages, and relative to the dominance and prioritization of European languages, their perceived relevance and prestige may be diminished (Anderson, 2022). This is compounded by funding trends, as evidenced by Interview 1 (April 2, 2024), which indicates a decline in federal funds for foreign language and area studies. This funding reduction directly impacts institutions' ability to offer comprehensive language training, further disadvantaging less commonly taught languages, including African languages.

Another impact is on what it was referred as "Funding Game." Participants in the study frequently referred to the need to align program offerings and justifications with the terminology and priorities of funding agencies, often using terms like «critical» and «less commonly taught» strategically to secure resources Interview 1 (April 2, 2024). This highlights the influence of external funding structures on shaping the landscape of language education

> «Then we're using the term foreign language because that's what FLAS is using. And then, of course, FLAS has a priority for critical languages. So that's when I think that's oftentimes how we're thinking about critical languages. And same with Department of Defense funding. We're using kind of the language of the funders to position ourselves again to be competitive for that funding so that we can offer these opportunities to students. So, I think a little of it is, it's, you know, playing the game of funding, right? And then same with the less commonly taught languages, I think there's also kind of funding streams and. And sort of general discourse in certain kind of universities, especially universities that host area studies, Title VI centers like ours, that also has a focus on less commonly taught languages. So, I would say a lot of the terminology that we use is aligned with the funding streams in service, you know, with the recognition that this ultimately serves our students and enables them to broaden their perspectives and their horizons» (Interview 1, April 2, 2024).

Consequently, the study reveals a pervasive «funding game» within language education. Interview 1 (April 2, 2024) demonstrates that institutions strategically align their program offerings and justifications with the terminology and priorities of funding agencies, often employing terms like «critical» and «less commonly taught» to enhance their chances of securing resources. As Interview 1 emphasizes, «We're using kind of the language of the funders to position ourselves again to be competitive for that funding so that we can offer these opportunities to students.» This strategic maneuvering underscores the significant influence of external funding structures in shaping the landscape of language education, where funding priorities can dictate which languages and programs receive support, ultimately impacting the perceptions of these languages due to these labels/positioning and opportunities available to students. This foreshadows the ideology and power dynamic in language education.

Language Ideology and Power Dynamics. The choice between these designations, «foreign» or «critical,» implicitly reflects and perpetuates particular language ideologies. It is tied the language program with power dynamics within academia. The English language dominance continues.

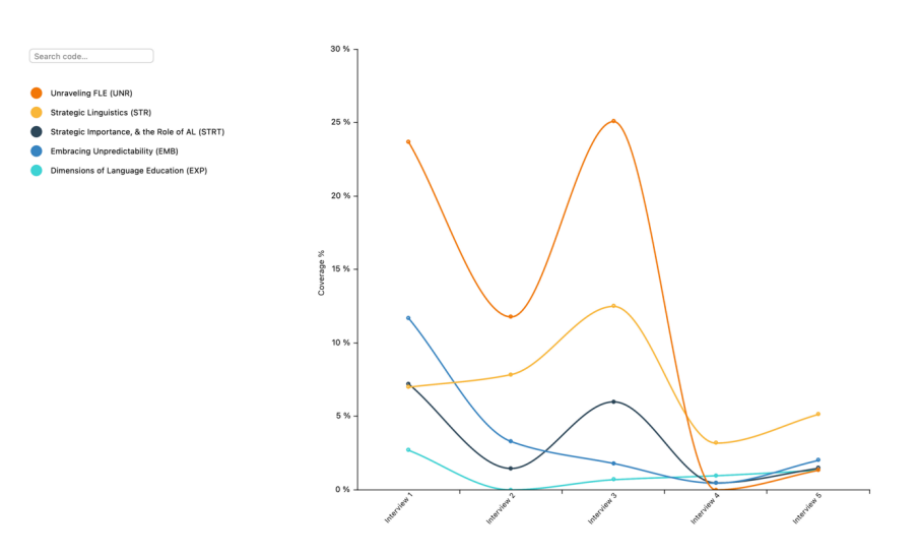

Figure 3. Trends Across Five Interviews for Positioning as 'Foreign' or 'Critical' and Its Impact on African Languages Programs.

The chart highlights key themes related to language ideology and power dynamics in education, particularly emphasizing foreign language education, strategic linguistics, unpredictability in education strategies, and language policy considerations. The prevalence of Unraveling Foreign Language Education (UNR) across interviews underscores ongoing concerns about the positioning of foreign languages within educational systems. Meanwhile, the Strategic Importance of African Languages (STRT) fluctuates in prominence, indicating shifting emphasis on the role of indigenous languages in development and policy. The Embracing Unpredictability (EMB) theme, which peaks early but declines over time, suggests that while adaptability is initially prioritized, structured strategies and national language policies gain prominence. Similarly, Strategic Linguistics (STR) and Dimensions of Language Education (EXP)increase in relevance, pointing to a growing recognition of planned language education programs, funding concerns, and policy-driven frameworks. According to Cavanaugh (2020), language ideology invites "the premise that power shapes all interactions" and "think about language and how that may serve the powerful, reinforce social hierarchies, or shape our opportunities are as crucial to attend to now" (pp. 52, 56).

The initial focus on foreign language education and adaptability transitions toward structured, policy-driven discussions in later interviews, signaling an evolving preference for stability and national interest alignment. The findings suggest that language policy must balance flexibility with strategic planning, ensuring that educational frameworks align with both global linguistic demands and local language preservation efforts. This shift underscores the need for sustainable, well-funded, and adaptable language education policies that address power asymmetries while fostering inclusive, equitable language development strategies.

In summary, the choice between language designations like «foreign» and «critical» reflects underlying language ideologies and power dynamics within academia, particularly in relation to English language dominance. The thematic trends across interviews highlight a shift from initially prioritizing foreign language education and adaptability (UNR, EMB) towards structured, policy-driven discussions emphasizing strategic

linguistics and national priorities (STR, EXP). This evolution underscores deeper ideological struggles in language education, where foreign language dominance vies with national linguistic priorities, shaping power dynamics in policy and educational planning. Therefore, a critical re-evaluation of how languages are categorized and valued within academic institutions is necessary. Moving beyond simplistic dichotomies, like «foreign» or «critical,» towards a more nuanced understanding of linguistic diversity and the multiple roles languages play in education, research, and global engagement is essential for fostering inclusive and equitable language development strategies.

Implications of the Study for African Language Education in Higher Education: Lessons for Both Africa and US

The insights gleaned from the US case study have significant implications for African higher education institutions seeking to strengthen the position of African languages in their curricula and research agendas. African universities should advocate for and contribute to the development of comprehensive national and institutional language policies that promote multilingualism, recognizing and supporting the use of multiple languages, including indigenous African languages, in education, research, and administration. This goes beyond simply acknowledging linguistic diversity; it requires actively creating spaces and opportunities for these languages to thrive. Additionally, there is a need to challenge colonial language ideologies by deconstructing the legacy of colonial language policies that privilege European languages over African languages. This involves critically examining curricula, teaching materials, and assessment practices to ensure they are not perpetuating linguistic hierarchies. Equitable resource allocation is also crucial, with adequate funding and resources needed to support African language programs, including teacher training, curriculum development, and research initiatives. Furthermore, efforts should be made towards the standardization and harmonization of less commonly taught languages by creating standardized orthographies and materials.

Curriculum development and pedagogical innovation are essential for integrating African languages across disciplines, moving beyond treating them as isolated subjects. This integration should span literature, history, social sciences, natural sciences, and professional fields, demonstrating the relevance of these languages to all areas of knowledge production. Developing culturally relevant curricula that reflect the rich cultural heritage and contemporary realities of African societies is also important. This includes using authentic materials, incorporating indigenous knowledge systems, and engaging with local communities. Emphasizing the development of practical language skills that enable students to use African languages effectively in real-world contexts is key, focusing on oral communication, literacy, and intercultural competence. Embracing technology to enhance language learning through online resources, mobile apps, and virtual exchange programs can help overcome resource constraints and provide access to a wider range of learning materials. Additionally, conducting research on African languages, creating publications, and increasing their visibility globally are vital steps.

Investing in teacher education is critical, with robust teacher training programs needed to equip educators with the pedagogical skills and linguistic knowledge necessary to teach African languages effectively. Ongoing professional development opportunities should be provided, and teacher collaboration should be promoted through networks and platforms for sharing best practices, resources, and experiences. Recognizing and rewarding expertise by providing incentives and acknowledgment for teachers who specialize in African languages is also important. Global partnerships and collaboration can further strengthen African language programs. Establishing partnerships with US and other international universities that have strong African language programs can facilitate student and faculty exchanges, joint research projects, and resource sharing. Engaging with African diaspora communities can provide opportunities for language learners to interact with

native speakers and experience the cultural contexts of the languages they are studying. Promoting African languages in international forums by advocating for their inclusion in conferences, publications, and research initiatives can raise their visibility and demonstrate their global relevance.

Advocacy and awareness-raising efforts are essential to challenge negative perceptions and combat stereotypes and misconceptions about African languages. Promoting their value and importance for individual and societal development is crucial. Highlighting the cognitive, social, economic, and cultural benefits of learning and using multiple languages, including African languages, can help shift perceptions. Engaging with policymakers and stakeholders to advocate for policies and initiatives that support African language education and promote linguistic diversity at the national and institutional levels is also necessary. These strategic approaches collectively offer a comprehensive framework for strengthening African languages in higher education, ensuring their development and sustainability.

Conclusion

The revalorization of African languages within global academia requires a fundamental shift in perspectives, policies, and practices. The US case study, while highlighting the challenges faced by African language programs in a context dominated by English and shaped by specific national priorities, also reveals valuable lessons about the strategic importance of these languages, the need for institutional support, and the potential for innovation in curriculum development and pedagogy. African higher education institutions, by embracing multilingualism, decolonizing knowledge production, and investing in the development of African languages, can play a crucial role in shaping a more equitable and inclusive global academic landscape. This involves not only promoting the use of African languages within their own institutions but also advocating for their recognition and value on the international stage. Ultimately, the future of African scholarship and its contribution to global knowledge depends, in part, on the successful repositioning of African languages as vital tools for learning, research, and intercultural communication.

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Sent by the Gods

François Duvalier's Appropriation and Performance of Divine Authority

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Abstract

Throughout history, several ancient and modern states have been ruled by monarchs to whom have been accorded degrees of deified recognition and authority. While the tradition is rooted in sacred belief systems and narratives, the latter have also been subject to conflicting interpretation and reinterpretation. Essentially, the manner in which a leader is bequeathed with divine authority also lends itself to manipulation. In time, this practice has evolved from a mandate that ensured the submission of leaders to ethical societal laws to its utilization as a weapon with which to achieve absolute dictatorial control. Haiti's "Papa Doc" Duvalier is exceptional in this regard as he successfully cast himself as a deity of a religious practice rooted in his African ancestry, Vodou, and was thus able to garner unconditional loyalty from the people. He is an extreme embodiment of the grim and ruthless options available to the ruler who seizes or is conferred with the status of a supernatural being[1].

Keywords: Sacred leaders, François Duvalier, Vodou, Efik Obong, Egyptian Pharaoh, Yoruba Oba

Introduction

Throughout global political history, authoritarian rule has frequently drawn legitimacy from claims of divine sanction. In the Western tradition, monarchic power was deeply entwined with the notion of divine right, presenting the sovereign as God's appointed ruler on earth. From the "Rex Dei Gratia" ("King by the Grace of God") inscriptions of medieval Europe to the sacral coronation rites of French and English monarchs, divine legitimation offered more than a metaphysical rationale for authority. It established a sacred order in which obedience transcended human law. This convergence of the sacred and the political underpinned absolutist regimes, where defiance could be cast as blasphemy and allegiance to the crown became a religious duty.

Across many African societies, both on the continent and throughout the diaspora, similar spiritual and political authority are deeply entangled, though rooted in ontologies and epistemologies that are distinct from Western secular frameworks. Within these cosmological and political systems, rulership transcends mere secular governance and is imbued with sacrality. The sovereign is frequently construed as a liminal figure—either a

1 Authoritarian rule assumes unique dimensions when leaders inherit, adopt, or are bestowed with a supernatural persona that provides the template for consolidating a Cult of Personality syndrome by which they demand absolute allegiance. This article is informed by this this politico-religious trend and underscores its impact on systems of global governance and stability. It has not been presented at any conference.

reincarnated deity or a living intermediary between the human realm and the spiritual order, including ancestors and divine entities. In Yoruba cosmology, for instance, the *Ọba* functions as both a king and a custodian of spiritual balance. This understanding of rulership as a sacred duty finds expression in the investiture rituals of the Congo, Asante, and Dahomey kingdoms, where the invocation of divine and ancestral powers serves both to legitimize the sovereign and to bind their authority to spiritual accountability. Significantly, this idea of sacred kingship has persisted and evolved within diasporic traditions—appearing in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Santería, and African American liberation theology—where sacred kingship serves as both a form of political resistance and a means of spiritual affirmation amid systemic oppression.

To fully understand how divine legitimation undergirds authoritarian forms of rule in African and African diasporic contexts, one must look beyond surface-level anthropological descriptions and engage with the deeper cultural, cosmological, and philosophical foundations of these traditions. This demands an intellectual history that situates sacred kingship within broader epistemological systems—systems that integrate ritual, governance, and the metaphysics of power. Such an approach opens critical space for examining how spiritual ontologies, rather than serving merely as instruments of domination, can both authorize and contest authoritarianism, depending on how the relationship between the sacred and political authority is imagined and enacted.

Authoritarian rule assumes unique dimensions when leaders inherit, adopt, or are bestowed with a supernatural persona that provides the template for consolidating a Cult of Personality syndrome by which they demand absolute allegiance. With a godlike status, the individual is delineated as flawless and in possession of powers more mysteriously devastating than conventional weapons. Sometimes, this is achieved through submission to a longstanding history of ruler fetishization or the elevation of individuals to superhuman prominence, earning them unconditional loyalty swayed by religious fervor as opposed to intimidation by physical terror and sheer brutality.

History is replete with instances where leaders are venerated and endowed with omnipotent—even immortal—statuses. In African metaphysical thought, such veneration is not merely symbolic or political; it is deeply rooted in the cosmological belief that reality is a continuum between the physical and the spiritual. Within this framework, certain individuals, especially rulers, priests, and founders of dynasties, are believed to embody or channel sacred forces, ancestral spirits, or divine mandates.

These leaders are often seen as *living ancestors* or chosen vessels through whom spiritual power flows. This belief is reinforced through sacred narratives, whether transmitted orally or written down, that portray them as divinely chosen, born under exceptional circumstances, or capable of communing with the spirit world. In such contexts, leadership is not merely a function of political power, but a metaphysical state that binds the community to the cosmos.

The conferment of divine or semi-divine status on leaders thus becomes a central mechanism for securing absolute allegiance. It is not simply a matter of indoctrination, but part of a broader ontological reality in which spiritual legitimacy and political authority are inseparable. Followers, therefore, do not just obey a ruler; they revere and submit to what that ruler represents: a link to the ancestors, the gods, and the organizing principles of the universe.

This metaphysical view explains why resistance to such leaders, even when they become tyrannical, is often fraught with spiritual anxiety or fear of cosmic disorder. It also sheds light on why rituals of succession, burial, and remembrance of African rulers are often highly elaborate—ensuring continuity not only of leadership but of cosmic harmony. In many African societies, the death of a ruler is not simply a political event; it is a metaphysical rupture that must be carefully managed to restore balance between the living and the spiritual realms.

While this metaphysical belief system was embraced by various ancient African societies, the transatlantic slave trade led to its transformation and readaptation within New World contexts, giving rise to African-influenced religions across the Americas and redefining its cultural, political, and spiritual significance. However, unlike the ancestral communities from which these creolized religions have evolved, their leaders and adherents in the countries where they exist—Cuba, Brazil, Jamaica, Haiti, among others—have not typically evoked their religious standings and commitments as a basis for openly demanding political power and authority. This article contends that this trend changed remarkably with former President François Duvalier of Haiti, a country noted for its largescale devotion to Vodou (also spelled *Vodun, Vodoun, Voudoun, Voudou, Vaudoux*), which syncretizes West African religious traditions with Catholicism. Duvalier would not only declare his devotion to Vodou; he would also declare his ascension to the status of Vodou deity as part of his resolve to gain absolute power over the country. To fully appreciate Duvalier's strategy, it is important to explain the *monarch-as-god* phenomenon within the context of its prehistoric practice in three African cultures.

The Egyptian, the Yoruba, the Efik

For centuries, diverse societies across Africa and beyond have articulated and institutionalized the concept of the leader as a superhuman entity, embodying both spiritual and temporal authority. This construction of leadership transcends mere political governance, drawing deeply from exclusive religious frameworks, elaborate rituals, codified attire, gendered roles, and clearly demarcated power hierarchies. The cultures of ancient Egypt, the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, and the Efik of southeastern Nigeria exemplify this phenomenon, each offering a distinct yet interconnected paradigm through which leadership is both sacralized and exercised. Despite significant external influences—most notably the introduction and spread of Christian and Islamic doctrines—these societies have maintained and adapted their indigenous conceptions of leadership. These adaptations often involve a syncretic blending of traditional cosmologies with imported religious tenets, ensuring the continuity of leadership ideologies that confer upon rulers an almost transcendent status. The sustained transmission of these beliefs and practices across generations underscores the resilience and dynamism of cultural identities in negotiating historical transformations and external pressures.

Egyptian pharaohs, predominantly male but occasionally female, occupied a unique and exalted position that transcended mortal existence. Upon their death, they were not merely buried but deified—transformed into divine beings who became one with Osiris, the god of death, resurrection, and fertility. This sacred transformation was no abrupt leap but the natural culmination of their earthly role as indispensable mediators between the human world and the mystical, divine realms. The pharaoh's life was a continuous enactment of this divine connection, marked by symbols of power and spiritual authority. Chief among these was the serpent, usually a rearing cobra known as the uraeus, worn prominently on the pharaoh's crown.[2] This living emblem was not just ornamental; it symbolized the ruler's divine protection, infinite wisdom, and unparalleled power—a visible sign that the pharaoh stood at the axis of heaven and earth, chosen by the gods themselves.

Before their death, pharaohs were closely linked to the god Horus, the falcon-headed deity who embodied kingship and victory over chaos. Horus was famed for restoring order to a world threatened by destructive forces, and in this divine association, the pharaoh became the living guarantor of Egypt's stability and cosmic balance. This connection underscored the pharaoh's role as a charismatic leader who was both earthly monarch and spiritual guardian, a figure whose very presence was believed to repel chaos and secure prosperity for the land and its people.

2 From *Smendes: King of Egypt,* by Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1998 (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pharaoh-Smendes).

Yet the pharaoh's power extended beyond mere symbolism. As a semi-divine spirit-being, the ruler was charged with officiating complex religious ceremonies that reaffirmed the cosmic order and maintained harmony between gods and humans. Their responsibilities included selecting sacred sites to erect monumental temples and awe-inspiring monuments that simultaneously celebrated their own achievements and paid reverent homage to the divine pantheon.[3] Bojana Mojsov vividly captures this performative dimension of Egyptian kingship, describing how "pageant and fanfare promoted the institution of divine kingship…. These were grand, theatrical spectacles involving large casts and plentiful extras, all meticulously orchestrated around the central figure—the pharaoh himself. These dramas were enacted in principal shrines throughout Egypt, designed to propitiate and overcome the dark, chaotic forces that threatened the pharaoh's absolute power."[4]

Perhaps the most enduring testament to the pharaoh's quest for immortality and divine legitimacy was the construction of pyramids—majestic tombs intended to serve as eternal homes for the exalted kings in the afterlife. This tradition began with the visionary King Djoser of the Third Dynasty, who commissioned the revolutionary Step Pyramid, setting a new architectural standard that would inspire generations. Old Kingdom rulers elevated this legacy, culminating in the monumental Great Pyramid of Giza, constructed under King Khufu. This unparalleled feat of engineering not only immortalized Khufu's name but also crystallized the idea that the pharaoh was an invincible, god-like figure whose power transcended time. As Mojsov eloquently summarizes, "The leadership of the divine ruler came to personify the stability of society. Throughout Egyptian history the word for 'state' had not been invented. The idea was implicit in the person of the king and the institution of monarchy."[5]

In essence, the pharaoh was not merely a ruler in the political sense but the living embodiment of Egypt's order, divinity, and eternal continuity—a cosmic fulcrum on which the fate of the land balanced. Their reign was a seamless fusion of earthly governance and celestial mandate, their legacy enshrined not only in stone but in the spiritual fabric of a civilization that saw no division between the human and the divine.

The Yoruba Oba

Highlighting the symbolic importance of the Oba's crown, art historian Marsha Bol underscores that Yoruba royal regalia is far more than ornamental; it is a sacred ensemble that communicates divine authority, ancestral lineage, and spiritual mediation. At the center of this regalia is the Oba's elaborate, beaded crown, or *ade*, a richly adorned headpiece that serves as a visual and metaphysical anchor of kingship. The crown's distinctive conical shape reflects a cosmological axis—the link between heaven and earth—while the birds affixed to its apex symbolize the Oba's connection to the spiritual realm, particularly to the òrìṣà (deities) and the ancestral forces that guide the community. According to Bol, these avian figures often reference Ogun, the deity of iron and transformation, or represent the collective power of elder women, known as the àjẹ́, whose spiritual authority and protective presence are essential to the well-being of the kingdom.

The crown's most enigmatic feature, however, is the veil of beaded strands that cascades down to conceal the Oba's face. This veil is not a mere flourish of aesthetic design; it embodies a profound theological and cultural concept. To see the Oba's face unveiled is to come dangerously close to divine radiance, a spiritual force believed to be too powerful and overwhelming for ordinary human eyes. By shielding his visage, the Oba both protects his subjects and amplifies his own mystique, becoming less a man and more a living symbol of ancestral and cosmic order. The veil thus serves to depersonalize the king, transforming him into a vessel of sacred kingship—a tradition that echoes the belief that rulers are chosen not merely by lineage but by divine ordination.

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3 From *Pharaoh,* by J.J. Mark, 2009, September 2 (https://www.ancient.eu/pharaoh).
4 From Enter the divine king in *Osiris: death and afterlife of a god* (pp. 10–14, 12) by B. Mojsov, 2005, Wily-Blackwell.
5 See Footnote 4 (p. 14).

Through these richly symbolic elements, the Yoruba crown encapsulates a convergence of history, mythology, and metaphysics. It affirms the Oba not only as a temporal leader but as a sacred intermediary who stands at the threshold of the natural and supernatural worlds. As Bol explains, every aspect of the crown, from its structure to its iconography, reinforces the idea that kingship is a spiritual institution, deeply embedded in Yoruba cosmology and sustained by ritual performance, ancestral reverence, and divine endorsement. Underscoring its deep symbolic importance, she explains:

> When the oba wears the crown, he embodies divinity. The conical-shaped beaded crown (*adenla*, translated as "big crown heavy with power") with its veil of beaded strands is the prime symbol of Yoruba divine kingship. The oba only rarely wears this crown, limiting its use to state occasions, such as his own coronation, ceremonial festivals, and conferment of titles and judgements. So powerful is the crown, imbued with the royal ancestral spirit, that it can serve as a material substitute for the king by being placed on the throne, where his subjects must observe the same protocols as if the king were present.[6]

The Efik Obong

Among the Efik people of Calabar in southeastern Nigeria, the institution of kingship is deeply intertwined with spirituality, cosmology, and ancestral authority. The Obong, the sovereign and traditional ruler, is not merely a political figure but a sacred embodiment of divine presence and ancestral continuity. His authority transcends temporal governance and is perceived as divinely ordained even before the formal rites of installation take place.

The process leading to the coronation of an Obong begins with a period of ritual seclusion and meditation within a sacred kingship shrine known as *Efe Asabo*, or the Cobra Shrine. This shrine is consecrated to *Ndem*, the powerful water deity revered by the Efik as a guardian of spiritual equilibrium, fertility, and ancestral connection. The Obong-elect's retreat into this shrine serves both as a rite of purification and a liminal transition, during which he symbolically sheds his former identity and is spiritually reconstituted as *Edidem*—a term denoting majesty, divine sanction, and supreme authority.

This spiritual retreat is not a passive withdrawal, but an active engagement with metaphysical forces. Through prescribed meditative practices, ritual observances, and symbolic communion with the deities, the Obong-elect is initiated into a sacred kinship with *Ndem* and, by extension, the entire pantheon of Efik gods. This transformative phase affirms his ontological shift from an ordinary mortal to a divine intermediary—a living conduit between the spiritual and material worlds.

The culmination of this metaphysical journey is the coronation ceremony, an elaborate and highly theatrical rite conducted by the chief priest or priestess of *Ndem*. Central to the ceremony is the invocation of ancestral spirits and deities through chants and incantations. These utterances are not mere formalities; they function as performative acts that summon sacred forces to bear witness to, and legitimize, the king's investiture. The placement of the crown on the Obong's head marks his full assumption of divine kingship and the formal recognition of his status as the living embodiment of *Ndem*.

Following this, the priestess of *Ndem* performs the sacred anointing, applying water, white clay, and oil to the king's body. Each element bears profound symbolic significance: water, representing purification and rebirth; white clay, a signifier of spiritual potency and ancestral presence; and oil, emblematic of consecration, abundance, and divine favor. This ritual consecration seals the Obong's transformation and publicly affirms his role as both political leader and spiritual custodian.

6 From *The art & tradition of beadwork* (p. 145) by M. Bol, 2018, Gibbs Smith.

Even in death, the Obong does not lose his sacred status. He is revered as an ancestral presence whose influence continues to guide the living. His legacy, encoded in oral tradition and ritual memory, ensures that his spiritual authority endures beyond the grave, reaffirming the cyclical and eternal nature of kingship in Efik cosmology.

In this way, the Obong of Calabar embodies a unique synthesis of political leadership and religious mysticism, standing not only as a guardian of communal values but also as a vital link between the human and the divine.[7]

The above examples establish societal variations to the existence, significance, and acceptance of leaders bequeathed with supernatural roles and identities that rank on a par with their political positions. The Efik Obong, Egyptian Pharaoh, and Yoruba Oba are prime examples of collectively accepted leaders whose dedication to the welfare of the people and the preservation of long-held belief systems are rooted in standards of behavior as stipulated by accepted religious codes. However, this spiritual-political synthesis does not eliminate internal disputes. Differences in the interpretation of sacred duties, for instance, contributed to conflicts among Yoruba chiefs in the Oyo Empire during the precolonial period.

Continuities in the African Diaspora

Despite the profound disruptions caused by the international slave trade to African belief systems, institutions, and traditions, descendants of Africans have preserved numerous ancestral practices, albeit often transformed to varying degrees. These cultural retentions are evident throughout the diaspora, particularly in African-influenced religions such as Santería, Obeah, Vodou, and Candomblé, among others. However, unlike Islamic or Christian monarchies, these enduring traditions have rarely been invoked as a basis for asserting or legitimizing absolute political dominance. In the Ottoman Empire (1299–1922), for instance, the Sultan held both political and religious authority as the Caliph, the spiritual leader of Sunni Islam, thereby combining political and religious power in a single figure. Similarly, in the Kingdom of France (1643–1715), King Louis XIV exercised absolute authority. Known as the "Sun King," he centralized all political power under his control, famously declaring, "L'État, c'est moi" ("I am the state"). It was therefore intriguing when, from 1957 to 1971, late President François Duvalier of Haiti delineated himself as a leader endorsed by consecrated hierarchical structures within Vodou. Notwithstanding the widespread followership he garnered from practitioners of the faith, which continued after his death, his controversial self-enthronement as divine leader was an unprecedented, self-seeking adoption of the *leader-as-godlike* phenomenon that has historically shaped the scope and parameters of monarchical authority in several African societies. Unlike the standard application of this custom in precolonial African societies, however, Duvalier successfully assumed a holy persona that was as manipulative as it was destructive. It became a curious instance where a leadership ideal originally designed to ensure communal stability and administrative efficacy was revived and reapplied in a new setting where political victory and dominance were determined by individualistic and materialistic gain.

The Cult of "Papa Doc" Duvalier

Few dictators have matched François Duvalier's extreme efforts to adopt a supernatural persona, which he reinforced through the establishment of an unassailable system of macabre control. As such, Duvalier represents a distinctive case in the study of authoritarian regimes employing supernatural symbolism. In this regard, Paul Christopher Johnson's recap of François Duvalier's ability to wield absolute power by exploiting the intricacies of a secretist religion underscores the fact that his reputation as a celestial being, whether believed or disbelieved, is permanently etched in history. Johnson writes, "The case is that of Haiti and the religion of

7 From *Religion in Calabar: the religious life and history of a Nigerian town* (pp. 181-182) by R.I.J. Hackett, 1989, Mouton de Gruyter.

Vodou, as it was merged with political objectives by François Duvalier during his tenure as 'president-for-life' from 1957 to 1971. Duvalier represented himself in his discourse as being possessed of the historical spirit of the revolutionary hero Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and in his style impersonated the Vodou Gede spirit, Baron Samedi."[8] There are adherents to Vodou who still believe that, upon death, Duvalier underwent deification and has taken his rightful place among the pantheon of Vodou deities known as the *loa*.

Although Haiti officially proclaimed religious freedom during Duvalier's rule, he effectively leveraged the widespread adherence to various forms of Vodou among the population to advance his unusual political ambition of becoming "president-for-life." This occurred despite his public endorsement of Catholicism as the nation's primary religion. As his political aspirations intensified, Duvalier positioned himself as a Pan-Africanist figure, promoting Vodou as an indigenous religion of the majority Black population and portraying it as a potential instrument of resistance against the Haitian elite, the Catholic Church, and the French and German interests dominating the island's trade and utilities. By 1914, during World War I, several foreign powers—including France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States—competed for financial control over impoverished Haiti, culminating in the occupation of the island by American Marines. (1915-34).[9] Viewing these countries as foreign bullies, Duvalier intensified his pro-Black doctrine, which appealed to the underprivileged Black majority. To them, Duvalier not only championed their cause but also sanctioned Vodou as a key part of their ancestral heritage and African identity. Duvalier increasingly gave them a sense of cultural pride and championed resistance against the politically privileged, the occupying United States, and a *mulatto* class that had historically been favored over darker-skinned Haitians. Cognizant of the people's detestation of colonialism, neocolonialism, and foreign invasion, Duvalier exploited the widely held belief by Vodou devotees that the religion could be wielded as a supernatural weapon against one's enemies, a means to overcome injustice, and a symbol of the empowerment of marginalized Blacks. His superficial espousal of Vodou thus became a key factor in his rise to political power. As Paul Johnson explains, "In the hands of Duvalier, Vodou came to represent not a religious subnation under siege by an antagonistic state, and state-religion (Roman Catholicism), as it in fact was for more than half of the twentieth century but rather the State under siege by an antagonistic world…. Through Vodou Duvalier built what had perhaps not existed since the Revolution: a nation-state of 'the people."[10]

Throughout history, African diasporic religions, including but not limited to Candomblé, Rastafarianism, Santeria and, of course, Vodou, have been used to defy slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism, and, in general, alleged Western domineering religions and political systems. Despite Vodou's symbiotic relationship with Haitian society, the practice has periodically faced denunciation as was the case during the US occupation and the era of the Catholic Church's "anti-superstition" campaign of 1941. (The Catholic Church embarked on a similar campaign after Duvalier's son (Jean-Claude Duvalier) lost power in 1986, though a freedom of religion and legitimization of Vodou was reinstated in 1987.) Notwithstanding these shifts in recognition of Vodou, Duvalier was able to attain a cultural icon and hero status through his calculative endorsement of the religion.[11]

To understand Duvalier's eventual reliance on Vodou as a potent political tool, it is essential to trace its roots in his early life. Born in 1907, Duvalier was just eight when U.S. Marines occupied Haiti in 1915—a formative experience that would shape his worldview. As a high school student, he came to view the American presence as emblematic of Western degeneracy and oppression, and as a threat to Haiti's authentic African heritage. This heritage was embodied in Vodou practices and the French-based Creole language, both of which were central to *noirisme,* a black solidarity movement that Duvalier embraced in the early 1930s. *Noirisme* called for the

8 From Secretism and the apotheosis of Duvalier, by P.C. Johnson, 2006, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* 74 (2), pp. 420-445 (https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfj088).

9 From *Papa Doc & the Tontons Macoutes* (p. 38) by B. Diederich, et al., 1970, Markus Wiener Publishers. Also see Footnote 9 (p. 424).

10 See Footnote 9 (p. 424).

11 See Footnote 9 (p. 426).

affirmation of Haiti's indigenous culture and sought to dismantle a political order dominated by the lighter-skinned mulatto minority, advocating instead for empowerment of the Black majority. As Elizabeth Abbott has observed, "Dr. François Duvalier immersed himself in the traditional beliefs, analyzing, praising them almost to the point of proselytization. 'Voudou,' he wrote, 'elaborated on the soil of Africa whose anguished mystery it reflects, also expresses overwhelmingly the conscience of a race as it confronts the enigmas of this world…. [It] proclaims the survival of the soul in sanctifying the spirit of Ancestors.'"[12]

Just as Duvalier's engagement with Vodou is crucial to understanding his ideological and political transformation, a reassessment of his involvement with Negritude is equally important in tracing the development of his pro-African values. Duvalier became associated with the Negritude movement in the 1930s—a movement that, while less radical than *noirisme*, sought to reclaim African cultural identity and affirm Black pride. [13] Duvalier's pro-Black ideology found early nourishment in the teachings of his high school mentor, Jean Price-Mars, a pioneering Haitian intellectual and writer known for his advocacy of cultural authenticity. Price-Mars was among the first to argue that Vodou, far from being a primitive or barbaric superstition as colonial narratives had long portrayed it, was a legitimate and deeply rooted expression of African heritage and Haitian identity. Through Price-Mars's writings and classroom influence, Duvalier encountered a radical reimagining of Blackness, one that embraced African spiritual traditions as sources of strength, dignity, and national pride. This formative exposure laid the ideological foundation for Duvalier's later political vision, in which he weaponized cultural nationalism to consolidate power and align himself with the Black majority. Duvalier's political engagement deepened during his medical school years in his twenties, particularly through his friendship with the mystic Lorimer Denis, which encouraged his ethnographic study of Vodou. During this period, he also contributed to the nationalist poetry movement, which aimed to displace the French literary canon in favor of works rooted in Black identity and African-centered imagery. [14]

Alongside the formative influences of Vodou and the Négritude movement on his spiritual worldview and political ambitions, François Duvalier was also deeply shaped by the Catholic Church's antagonistic 1941 "anti-superstition" campaign. Initiated under the mulatto President Élie Lescot, the campaign was marked by violent repression—Vodou temples were razed, altars desecrated, ceremonial drums destroyed, and sacred objects confiscated. This assault on Vodou enraged Duvalier and other Black nationalists, who viewed it as an extension of anti-Black, colonialist ideology. In direct response, Haitian novelist Jacques Roumain founded the Bureau of Ethnology, where Duvalier's former mentor Jean Price-Mars and close associate Lorimer Denis held supervisory roles. Duvalier himself became actively involved in the Bureau, forging deep ties with Vodou priests (*houngans*) and priestesses (*mambos*). Through this network, Duvalier increasingly framed Haitian society in stark oppositional terms: on one side, the oppressed Black peasantry; on the other, the entrenched forces of colonial domination—represented by the mulatto elite of Port-au-Prince, the Catholic Church, and the occupying U.S. Marines.[15]

Although Duvalier's pro-Vodou and Pan-Africanist stance endeared him to the Haitian Black population, it was his role as a physician that earned him the status of a folk hero. In 1944, as part of a US-led medical campaign against the degenerative disease, yaws, the medically trained Duvalier was one of twenty Haitian doctors selected by the Inter-American Affairs Commission to study at the Graduate School of Public Health, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Like leprosy, yaws was rampant among Haitian peasants, causing excruciating skin decomposition. On completing his studies at Ann Arbor, Duvalier returned to Haiti and embarked on rigorous tours of the most remote villages of Haiti to vaccinate the people against the disease.[16] As his reputation grew among the peasants, he earned the esteemed nickname, *Papa Doc*, and, more importantly, many concluded that

12 From *Haiti: the Duvaliers and their legacy* (p.54) by E. Abbott, 1991, Simon and Schuster.
13 See Footnote 10 (p. 44).
14 See Footnote 9 (pp. 427-428).
15 See Footnote 9 (p. 428).
16 See Footnote 13 (p. 55).

his ability to cure yaws was not only the result of his medical training but also proof that he possessed mystical powers and could communicate with spirits. This became the advantage that Duvalier had over his political opponents – the fact that he was equipped with Western scholarship in addition to allegedly *possessing* the supernatural healing powers that Vodou devotees ascribed to some politicians.[17] Capitalizing on this image, Duvalier subsequently claimed unlimited religio-political powers and unleashed absolute control over the people.

Duvalier enjoyed other political advantages. Urban intellectuals found him credible as a Vodou ethnographer while his public health training in the US earned him the support of US officials. Most importantly, Duvalier was overwhelmingly embraced by the marginalized Black majority who welcomed his endorsement of Black nationalism. He became Haiti's new president after winning the 22 September 1957 elections, despite losing in Port-au-Prince. As president, Duvalier understood the importance of continuing to appeal to various segments of society, posturing as a devout Catholic while being perceived as a Vodou devotee and Catholic hater by the Black rural population. Those who believed in his commitment to Vodou were encouraged by his expulsion of foreign Protestant and Catholic priests beginning in 1959, though he replaced them with local priests. But even more intriguing were reports about his otherworldly ventures, which increasingly defined him as one with the pantheon of Vodou deities. A precedent had already been set with Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the first Black Emperor of Haiti, who, upon death, was deified as a companion of the Yoruba god of iron and war, *Ogun (Ogu* in Vodou), and therefore a Vodou spirit and member of the *loa*. Duvalier understood the advantages of establishing a religio-political link to Dessalines on whose tomb he was rumored to sleep one night each year.[18] Dancer and anthropologist Katherine Dunham has expounded on this affiliation, even if delusional, explaining that "it is by order of Duvalier that the date of the death of Dessalines has become a national holiday and a ceremony is performed at Pont Rouge. A flame burns day and night before the tomb of Dessalines, the contents of which were once removed and placed elsewhere…but rumors go even further and say that they have since been disinterred and put to ceremonial black magic use…."[19]

Even as he promoted the emergence of an unprecedented Black ruling class, Duvalier continued to systematically appeal to Port-au-Prince's *mulatto* elites and the West in general. His strategy was to portray himself as a devout Catholic and, notably, as a president chosen and endorsed by God Almighty. By 1964 when Duvalier upgraded his status to "president-for-life," he began to exploit the power of self-elevating theatrical representation. A government newspaper, for instance, flaunted a picture of Jesus Christ laying his hand on the dictator's shoulder with the caption, "I have chosen him."[20] This was just one instance of Duvalier's public demagoguery, which featured a range of accolades, among which were, "I am the Haitian Flag, One and Indivisible," "Duvalier, President for Life," "Supreme Chief of the Haitian nation," "Uncontestable Leader of the Revolution," "Apostle of National Unity," "Renovator of the Fatherland," and "Chief of the National Community."[21] Most indicative of Duvalier's growing self-deification, however, was his administration's release, also in 1964, of a pamphlet to be taught in Haitian schools. Titled, The Catechism of the Revolution, it delivered an audacious parody of the Lord's Prayer: "Our Doc, who are in the National Palace, hallowed be Thy name in the present and future generations. Thy will be done at Port-au-Prince and in the provinces.

17 See Footnote 13 (428-429).

18 See Footnote 9 (p. 435).

19 From Island possessed (p. 162) by K. Dunham, 1969, University of Chicago Press.

20 From *How human rights can build Haiti: activists, lawyers, and the grassroots campaign* (p. 29) by F. Quigley, 2014, Vanderbilt University Press.

21 From *The Haiti files: decoding the crisis* (p. 19) by J. Ridgeway, 1994, Latin America Bureau. Also see Duvalierism (p.328) by J. M. Dash, 2010, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought: 2-volume set,* B. Jeyifou & F. A. Irele (Eds.), Oxford University Press.

Give us this day our new Haiti and never forgive the trespasses of the anti-patriots who spit every day on our country. Let them succumb to temptation, and under the weight of their venom, deliver them not from any evil."[22]

François Duvalier's decision to consolidate power beyond the traditional reliance on the military and law enforcement was both deliberate and strategic. Haiti, after all, had long been plagued by chronic coups and ephemeral governments. Between 1843 and 1915 alone, the country saw twenty-two heads of state, only one of whom completed a full term. Even Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the revered hero of the Haitian Revolution, met a violent end—assassinated and dismembered in the streets in October 1806, a mere two years after taking power.

Fully aware of this legacy of political instability and institutional fragility, Duvalier ruled with calculated ruthlessness, determined to maintain his grip on power.[23] He knew that appealing to the elites and the Catholic Church would not suffice, nor could he rely solely on the personal militia he had created—the Tonton Macoute—especially after a failed military coup against him in July 1958 shook his trust in the armed forces.[24] To tighten his hold further, Duvalier cast himself as a Vodou deity—a move as psychologically potent as it was politically shrewd in a society where legitimacy was deeply intertwined with myth, religion, and tradition. This self-deification amplified the aura of fear and reverence surrounding Duvalier, compelling total submission from a population already conditioned by uncertainty and repression.

Duvalier's ultimate transformation is alleged to have happened after he suffered a diabetes-related heart attack on 24 May 1959, which left him in a coma for nine hours until he was revived by a glucose injection administered by one of his principal assistants, Clement Barbot. If the coma had affected him mentally, his followers saw things differently, believing that he had undergone a rite of passage that transformed him into the incarnation of the Vodou *loa* Baron Samedi (though his physician concluded that he suffered a neurological damage that affected his mental health). Believed to be one of the most terrifying of all Vodou deities, Baron Samedi is both the god of death and fertility and a stalker of graveyards at night. On assuming this identity, Duvalier began to dress publicly in a black suit, dark glasses, and bowler hat, which is how Samedi is traditionally portrayed. His speeches were increasingly made in a deep nasal voice, which is also how Samedi is believed to sound.[25] From political heavyweight, Catholic emissary, and Vodou adherent, Duvalier now assumed the status of a Vodou deity and therefore head of the religious practice throughout Haiti. He made the point clear during his visit to Croix-des-Bouquets, a Vodou stronghold, after he recovered from his heart attack. Elizabeth Abbott recalls the encounter between Duvalier and the people of Croix-des-Bouquets, to whom he spoke in both Creole and French to demonstrate his perceived identity as intellectual and traditionalist. "He finished with a statement that was both simple and chilling. 'Never forget that I am the supreme authority of the State,' he warned them. 'Hence forth, I, I alone, I am your only master.' The *houngans* and *mambos* understood exactly what he meant. He was one of them, and for the good of every single Haitian they would have to pray for [to?] him, and never forget to make the proper sacrifices to the spirits who alone could protect them."[26]

Besides arrogating the identity of Baron Samedi through costume and voice, Duvalier secured his image by generating an aura of mysticism and a culture of macabre brutality that Vodou adherents associated with the *loa*. He steadily built a cult around the number twenty-two, being that he was first elected on 22 September 1957 and was inaugurated as president on 22 October of the same year. Openly repulsed by Duvalier, US President John Kennedy had cut aid to Haiti and was determined to remove the Haitian dictator from power. After Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, Duvalier cited the date that the incident occurred, 22 November,

22 Quoted in *Haiti: The tumultuous history – from pearl of the Caribbean to broken nation* (p. 103) by P.R. Girard, 2010, Palgrave Macmillan.

23 From *Evolution of evil E01: Papa Doc Duvalier*, YouTube, 2018b, May 20 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ds7hmyvbckI).

24 See Footnote 13 (p. 82).

25 See Footnote 24.

26 See Footnote 13 (pp. 102-103).

as being supernaturally symbolic. Claiming that he had put a curse on Kennedy, Duvalier took credit for orchestrating his murder, further instilling fear in his followers and the people of Haiti.[27] Paul Christopher Johnson has reexamined the mystical link that Duvalier established between his authority, identity, and the number twenty-two. In his words, "In 1958, when Duvalier was first to meet in person the feared Dominican strongman Trujillo, he set the meeting for 22 December. In 1964 he declared himself president-for-life on 22 May. Indeed he used the date routinely to schedule important meetings. In 1968, after yet another coup attempt against Duvalier, the captured rebels were flown to Port-au-Prince to be interrogated by the president himself on the special day requested, 22 May."[28]

Frustrated by Kennedy's death and the apparent absence of any resistance against Duvalier, thirteen Haitians who called themselves "Jeun Haiti" ("Young Haiti") sailed from New York to Haiti in the summer of 1964 to carry out a guerrilla-type revolution to overthrow the Haitian leader. But they were eventually routed and killed by Haitian forces. After the first, Yvon Laraque, was killed, his rotting and stinking corpse was placed on an armchair outside the arrival hall of the Port Au Prince International Airport and was the first thing that travelers and tourists saw after they exited the airport. This didn't only confirm Duvalier's ruthlessness but also served as a warning to anyone who dared to defy his authority. The last two of the "Jeun Haiti" to be captured, Louis Drouin and Marcel Numa, were publicly executed against the wall of the national cemetery in the equivalent of a grisly circus show that was televised. Following Duvalier's declaration of the day as a public holiday, schools were temporarily closed, and teachers were ordered to attend the execution along with their schoolchildren. Besides sending a clear message to potential insurgents, Duvalier's brutal treatment of the young men also reinforced his status as the *loa* of death and guardian of the cemetery. Their execution was one of several executions ordered by Duvalier and mostly carried out by his Tonton Macoute, some of which involved the massacre of thousands of unarmed men, women, and children charged with being involved in uprisings against his administration.

With time, Duvalier's rampant murder of political opponents and civilians became more and more morbid and ritualistic. This was the case when he murdered several men, women, and children in the district of Bel-Air, whose inhabitants were said to be doggedly opposed to Duvalier. First, their holy grounds, which periodically attracted thousands of worshippers, were ravaged and thus desecrated. Next, the people (including some of their piglets and chickens) were abducted in large numbers, gagged, tied, and buried alive in a huge pit that was eventually covered with cement. A message had been delivered and it was soon widely understood that "no man, woman, or child was safe, and through magic and sacrifice, the President had harnessed great forces of evil to assist him in his quest for absolute power."[29] It is estimated that as many as 30,000 to 60,000 Haitians were exterminated during Duvalier's rule. The numbers are unclear about political prisoners who were tortured to death, starved to death, or executed in public and private prisons.[30]

Duvalier's administration transformed into a grotesque display of kleptocracy and megalomania, marked by the systematic cultivation of a cult of personality that cast him as an infallible figure. Surrounded by sycophants and protected by a brutal security apparatus, he ruled through fear and manipulation, ensuring that dissent was not just discouraged but often met with swift and brutal punishment. In such an atmosphere of intimidation and repression, only a handful dared to question his authority, and even fewer survived the consequences.

After securing absolute power, Duvalier wanted more. He didn't just want to be linked to a god; he wanted to be the god. While violence guaranteed his place as president-for-life, it was Vodou that kept him there and he began to circulate myths about his otherworldly powers. In a speech after the constitutional referendum that affirmed him as "president-for-life" in 1964, Duvalier identified himself as an indestructible and immaterial

27 See Footnote 24.
28 See Footnote 9 (p. 439).
29 See Footnote 13 (pp. 80-81).
30 See Footnote 24.

being with superhuman powers; he was the dreaded Baron Samedi in human flesh. One of the more eerie rumors alleged that in March 1958 he travelled with a loyal *houngan* to Trou Forban, a sacred Vodou cave located in the hills, from where, after a ritual was performed, he procured and returned to the national palace with evil spirits known as Baka whom he offered a new home in his "mystic room." In addition to providing Duvalier with the extra protection he craved, their alleged presence became another means through which he instilled fear in the people.[31]

To match his iconic celestial persona, Duvalier's atrocities became disturbingly sinister to the extent that on 12 April 1959, he ordered his Macoute to hijack the funeral of his former friend and political rival, Clément Jumelle, and return to him Jumelle's coffin and corpse. Stories began to emanate from the presidential palace of how Duvalier placed the corpse in a room where he periodically sequestered himself and either communicated with it or used it in Vodou rituals. Jumelle's crime was that he not only dared to run against Duvalier in the presidential elections of September 1957, but, even worse, criticized the process and result as being heavily rigged.[32]

Whatever Duvalier did with Jumelle's body, he practiced what were most likely erroneously perceived as Vodou rituals, a key part of which entailed demanding the body parts of his murdered enemies. Though it is not clear what he did with them, commonplace accounts insist that he consulted with bodiless heads from which he received advice on a range of issues. These known and speculated rituals increasingly cast him as a mysterious being to be feared, especially among many unschooled and superstitious Haitians.

In the end, as Elizabeth Abbott argues, "the great Machiavellian François Duvalier would study voudou with as much devotion as an *houngan,* and then twist and use it to keep an entire population at his pitiless mercy."[33] In a society where the spiritual and physical worlds have coexisted intimately, he successfully became a master of both to the point of convincing the people of his immortality and of his ability to commune with the spirits of his murdered victims.

To be sure, Duvalier was neither a pro-Black nor religious leader. Vodou is more of a community religion than one that installs individuals as invincible political or military leaders. The close link that it creates between natural and supernatural realms, part of which entails spirit possession and the deification of the dead, was strategically exploited by Duvalier to reinvent himself as one of the most feared Vodou deities, a facade that he used to secure supreme power, reinforce his military and political authority, and bring the Haitian people to their knees. It is important to note, in this regard, that while Vodou does not endorse political leadership, Haitian society exhibits a powerful tradition comparable to societies that accord divine status to leaders or that deify political leaders. In other words, Haiti was (and perhaps still is) vulnerable to the type of religious-driven manipulation that Duvalier used to influence and subdue the majority Black citizens of the country.

Duvalier did not only exploit his people's devotion to Vodou; he also became one of the most dynamic tyrannical performers to manufacture a transcendent character on grand, public spaces, complete with his dark suits, bowler hats, and deep near-inaudible voice. His stage was not always physical or visible since it was also the mysterious world of Vodou that permeates the cultural and social psyche of Haitian society.

François "Papa Doc" Duvalier died of heart disease and diabetes on 21 April 1971. It would have been remarkably creepy if he died a day later (22 April), which would have coincided with his preferred magical number, twenty-two.

31 See Footnote 13 (pp. 81-82).
32 From *The Haitians: class and color politics* (191-193) by L. Paquin, 1983, Multi-Type. Also see Footnote 13 (pp. 94-95).
33 See Footnote 13 (p. 28).

Various societies have historically venerated their kings, chiefs, and emperors as godlike or gods; from the Chinese, Romans, and Greeks to the Japanese, Egyptians, Tibetans, Yoruba, and Efik. Extensive theatrical attributes typically run through the enforcement of this belief system, whether they are prescribed by age-old divine philosophies or informed by recently invented precepts and fantasies. To recap, some of these attributes are grandiose ceremonies; the creation and use of ritualized and performative spaces (like public arenas and buildings, television stations, religious houses, and forests); exclusive costumes and paraphernalia; use of animated language or language steeped in rich metaphor (by the holy leader or compliant disciples); and the tactical use of artistic forms like music and dance.

When Barry Rubin assesses despots who believe their unlimited wisdom transcends the gains of democracy, he is essentially stating that they exploit age-old beliefs that demand veneration for political leaders. In Rubin's words, "This relationship between leader and ruled is the new version of the medieval divine right of kings based on the relationship between the monarch and God."[34] The success of modern, self-serving, omnipotent autocrats is therefore rooted, at least in part, in the redefinition, misrepresentation, and misappropriation of such longstanding traditions of idolizing designated rulers. The emergence of this new breed of *divine* psychopaths also underscores the timeless truth that religion, depending on context and purpose, is eternally susceptible to self-serving misuse, not just by religious personalities but by political extremists with dreams of exercising unquestionable dominance.

Even among authoritarian leaders who do not flaunt a blatant religious identity, their make-believe supremacy drives them to seek a fundamental divine quality—*immortality*. Whereas the deification of pharaohs and Roman emperors strived for immortality, recent despots like the Kims of North Korea continue to stay "alive" through the children to whom they hand over power upon death, just as President Gnassingbé Eyadéma, former Togolese dictator, lives *vicariously* through his son, Faure Eyadéma, who became president after his father's death in 2005. The former President of Gabon, Ali Bongo Ondimba, assumed power immediately after his father, Omar Bongo, died in 2009. Duvalier prepared his son, Jean-Claude Duvalier ("Baby Doc") to succeed him after his death. Jean-Claude became President of Haiti a day after his father's death but lacking his father's calculated sadism (or superhuman powers?) was overthrown in 1986 and fled the country. His mother, Simone Duvalier, had taken extreme measures to secure the devil's protection, which should have guaranteed her son's invincibility as indisputable ruler over Haiti. The process entailed an incestuous spiritual marriage between mother and son, achieved through exclusive Vodou rituals, but failed in its goal as Jean-Claude faced charges of corruption and human rights abuse after returning from exile to Haiti in 2011. He died of a heart attack in 2014 before his trial was concluded.[35] Even so, François Duvalier must be consoled by the widespread belief that he is occupying a position among the council of esteemed Vodou gods as the embodiment of Baron Samedi. Nothing could be more "immortal" than this, a fact underscored by Paul Johnson in his comment: "After Papa Doc died on 21 April 1971, his son Jean-Claude was installed as president-for-life on the favored day, the 22nd. As the elder lay in state on the 23rd, wearing his familiar black suit and glasses, twenty-two soldiers and twenty-two tonton makoutes formed his honor guard. Even after his death, Duvalier achieved his apotheosis like Dessalines, just as he had hoped. His apotheosis arrived following the same numeric code, as the spirit called Loa 22 Os."[36]

The use of terror by pseudo-religious despots is often obscured by the illusion they craft—that their grip on power stems not from brute force but from a populace willingly bowing to a sacred figure. Yet overt aggression is not the only path through which religion is harnessed for political ends. It thrives just as effectively in polished, diplomatic settings: during swearing-in ceremonies that invoke holy texts, or in staged photo-ops where a president holds aloft a Bible before a church. These acts of pious theater, however hollow or hypocritical, matter only insofar as they continue to enchant followers who conflate religiosity with legitimacy.

34 From *Modern dictators: third world coup makers, strongmen, and populist tyrants* (p. 8) by B. Rubin, 1987, McGraw-Hill.

35 From *Jean-Claude Duvalier,* by Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2020 https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Claude-Duvalier).

36 See Footnote 9 (p. 439).

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From the Invisible to the Visible

Poetics of Colonial Disaster in Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade by Assia Djebar

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Abstract

Published in 1985, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* is a dialogic weaving together of narratives of the Algerian conquest, the war of decolonization, and fragments of autobiographical accounts. This structural choice, which organizes the novel around a framing narrative (Algerian history) and a framed narrative (the autobiographical account), appears to allow Djebar to construct a poetics that enables her to travel back in time and to navigate between domestic and public spaces in order to rethink and redefine the colonial space in Algeria. Thus, this study seeks to answer the issue: in what way is *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* not only a poetics of colonial disaster, but also an attempt to rethink and reinvent the Algerian colonial context? To address this issue, the theoretical concepts of geopoetics and traumatic sensory memory, drawn respectively from Kenneth White and psychoanalysis, will guide our analysis.

Keywords: decolonization, traumatic memory, geopoetics, disaster.

Introduction

French Imperialism and the Colonial War in Algeria have left enduring residues in the Algerian landscape that continue to haunt its people. The notion of geography here must be understood in a double sense: literally, as the geological and environmental constitution of the territory, and symbolically, as the realm of culture, memory, and the psyche. These residues are not only from the way Algerians directly experienced these historical events, but also from how these events were transmitted and narrated across generations. Algerian history is riddled with silences that literature stives to fill (Karima Lazali, 2018:13). These silences affect both collective memory and individual histories, particularly those of young Algerian girls and women, whose experiences are doubly occluded. Subjected to the intersecting oppressions of colonial domination and patriarchal structures, Algerian women have been systematically marginalized and excluded from the public sphere, their heroism in the struggle for decolonization often erased from the national narrative.

It is within this context that Assia Djebar develops a poetics that allows her to revisit the entanglement of individual and collective history—an entanglement overshadowed by erasure, with the aim of rewriting this past from the perspective of the colonized, rather than that of the colonizer.

This rewriting is, first and foremost, an expression of the resistance of the woman who is doubly a victim of erasure—historically and patriarchally. By rewriting colonial history from the perspective of women and adopting a poetics of the body that positions the woman as a living archive, Djebar enters into a dialogue with her predecessor Mariama Bâ, whose *So Long a Letter* reads like a manifesto for the female condition imprisoned by patriarchy. Djebar expands upon the chains that Bâ identifies as binding women, as she weaves colonial archives and colonial history together with personal and patriarchal histories, all while interrogating the tensions between memory, silence, and female voice. She aligns herself with the tradition of works exploring the quest for self, for both individual and national identity, particularly those of Frantz Fanon—especially in *The Wretched of the Earth* (2002: 228)—where he already emphasized the necessity of literature in decolonizing minds and in constructing national consciousness and identity within an Africa haunted by its colonial past. Djebar also probes the violence of both patriarchal and historical erasure, while proposing a poetics that offers a path toward healing the damage caused by these two existential catastrophes that have subjugated women for centuries, leaving behind, as Fanon wrote, *"wake here and there tinctures of decay which we must... mercilessly expel from our land and our spirits"* (Fanon, 2002: 239). This novel makes repair, first and foremost, a quest for the reconstruction of the self, of the female voice, and of the relationship to the Other. As such, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* stands as a foundational text in the discourse of reparative thought, a discourse that has often overlooked the patriarchal dimension. It is also a powerful act of rewriting colonial history, and even more so, the theorization of a feminine writing in the sense intended by Hélène Cixous, who insists on the urgency of such a project in these terms: *"Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing"* (Cixous, 2010: 37). In writing herself and in writing the Algerian woman, Djebar writes the subaltern woman in general. In this sense, the text may be considered not only transcultural and transnational, echoing the voices of all wounded, silenced, and erased women, from the centuries of the slave trade to the postcolony (with its continued erasure of history), passing through the colonial era itself, to borrow the terms of Achille Mbembe (2020). The exhumation of these buried voices from the layers of History and Geography in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* implies a reinvention of the colonial context, a sine qua non condition for allowing women to re-inscribe themselves into History, to resist "the classical man" (Cixous, 2010: 37–38), and to allow women to emerge into their meaning(s) and their history (ibid., 2010: 37–38).

The aim of this paper is, therefore, to address the question: in what way is *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (AF) by Assia Djebar not only a poetics of colonial disaster, but also an attempt to rethink and reinvent the Algerian colonial context? Answering this question requires analyzing the metadiscourse constructed by Djebar in order to reconsider, across time, and to reinvent the imperial and colonial context of Algeria. To guide our analysis, we will use the theoretical concepts of geopoetics and traumatic sensory memory, borrowed respectively from Kenneth White and psychoanalysis.

Before attempting to provide insights into this problematic, let us clarify the notion of geopoetics. Coined by Kenneth White, geopoetics refers to *"a transdisciplinary theory-practice applicable to all areas of life and research, which aims to restore and enrich the long-broken relationship between Man and Earth, with all the well-known ecological, psychological, and intellectual consequences, thus developing new existential perspectives in a grounded world"* (Kenneth White, 1994:14). In other words, geopoetics aims to imagine a new way of inhabiting the world. We will use this concept to show how Djebar's novel positions itself as an *"opener of space and founder of presence."* (Kenneth White, 1994:15) for the Algerian people who have been rendered invisible. The concept of traumatic memory, meanwhile, may be understood as *"a psychotraumatic consequence of the most serious forms of violence, manifested by intrusive recollections that completely invade consciousness (flashbacks, sensory illusions, nightmares), causing victims to relive the trauma, wholly or*

partially, with the same distress, terror, and physiological, somatic, and psychological reactions as experienced during the original violence" (Muriel Salmona, September 2008). In other words, traumatic sensory memory refers to the repeated reliving of traumatic experiences through the sensory organs (sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch). This concept will allow us to demonstrate how Djebar exhumes colonial trauma while filling in the silences and gaps left in History.

After examining how Djebar brings colonial trauma to the surface in her text, we will analyze how she attempts to overcome it, and finally, explore how her work gestures toward a new way of being in the world: the Relational.

Colonial Trauma

In *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (AF), Djebar undertakes a work of narrative weaving, drawing her raw material not only from war narratives and paintings created by the Colonizers, but also from oral traditions, in order to resurrect the trauma buried in the silences and gaps of History. In this weaving process, the gaze functions as a magnifying lens through which Djebar restages the colonial disaster that continues to haunt the Algerian people.

The Objectification of "Woman": Two Parallel Gazes

Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade depicts the Algerian "Woman," and Algerian "women" sharing a collective experience: that of an alienating and traumatic past. Although there may appear to be a graphic and phonetic redundancy in referring to the Algerian "Woman" and Algerian "women," it is important to note that the meaning diverges: the term "the Algerian Woman" refers to the Algerian Nation, whereas "Algerian women" refers to individual female Algerian subjects within the context of this study. Thus, on one hand, we have the Nation personified as Woman; on the other, we have Algerian women whose lived experiences intertwine. This metaphor is articulated by Djebar in *Fantasia* in the following terms: "The letters of these forgotten captains who claim to worry about their paperwork and careers, who sometimes share their personal philosophies, these letters, at their core, speak of an Algeria-as-woman, impossible to tame. A fantasy of a subdued Algeria [...]" (AF, 1995: 69). Therefore, the novel presents two faces of objectified Algerian women.

The first face of objectified woman is that of Algeria-as-woman. This objectification of Algeria as a Nation is rendered in the text through the eroticization of the colonial gaze. Algeria is perceived by the French colonizer as a *"virgin girl,"* an object to be conquered and to satisfy *"carnal"* desires. An analysis of recurring thematic fields (isotopies) such as *"Algeria-woman," "subdued Algeria," "lovers," "rape," "penetrated," "sexual mode," "defloration," "in love with a land," "harassment,"* and *"virgin nature"* reveals this objectification of Algeria as an object of sexual desire and domination. Indeed, does Djebar not write: *"Our captain [Bosquet] indulges in the illusion of this virile pastime: to merge with rebellious Africa"* (AF, 1995: 68)? Algeria, the beautiful and alluring virgin girl, is thus reduced to a sexual object, the embodiment of the colonizer's *fantasia*. This perception of Algeria as a sexualized object, its forced penetration by colonizers, has left behind what Fanon calls: *"the seeds of rot that must be relentlessly detected and eradicated from both their lands and their minds"* (Fanon, 2002: 229). Alongside this colonial objectification of Algeria, there exists a parallel objectification of Algerian women by the patriarchal system.

A critical reading of *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* reveals that Algerian women are reduced to mere "decorative objects" by the patriarchal system. Confined within the "harem" and concealed behind "the veil," Algerian women remain invisible, not only to the French colonizer but also to their own men, if not seen explicitly as *"ornamental objects"* of the harem. Their agency is denied, and their emotions are censored. They are subjected to nominative censorship, as illustrated by this passage: *"- He put his wife's name on it, and the postman must have read it? Shame!... - He could've addressed the card to your son instead, just for*

the principle of it, even if your son is only seven or eight!" (AF, 1995: 49). The rhetorical question, coupled with the derogatory term "*shame*," reflects not only the hypersexualization of Algerian women but also their social erasure, made even more explicit in the line: *"He could've addressed the card to your son."* In other words, the simple act of another man reading a woman's name is equated with engaging in sexual relations with her. This eroticization of the gaze reflects the essentialization of women in this context. The consequence of this essentialization is the objectification of women, whose ultimate symbolic representation is the wedding night, a night Djebar describes as one of assault, rape, silencing, and mutilation. The parallel Djebar draws between colonial oppression and patriarchal oppression does not aim to place these two forms of violence on the same level, but rather to highlight the depth of trauma produced by both systems. This becomes especially significant when these forms of oppression are also inscribed into space itself, producing what can be called a spatial disaster, a disruption so profound that it leaves no inhabitant unscathed.

On Spatial Disaster

In the context of this study, *spatial disaster* refers to the trauma resulting from spatial or geographical minimization. *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* presents two oppressive spaces: the colonial space and the patriarchal space, whose boundaries are porous. These two worlds coexist in Djebar's text, and from their interaction emerges the collective and individual trauma generated by these environments. Regarding the colonial space, it is, in Fanon's words, by its very structure and organization already *"a major supplier of psychiatric hospitals"* (Fanon, 2004: 229). In Djebar's narrative, the colonial space is depicted as a surveilled, alienating, and dehumanizing space, resembling a form of concentration camp. Fanon (2002: 42) had already described the degrading and traumatic nature of the colonial space as a juxtaposition of two worlds, separated by police and military force: on one side, the colonizer's world, marked by luxury and abundance; on the other, the colonized's world, marked by poverty, torture, and systemic violence. In *Fantasia*, the violence of the colonial space is expressed through the political and social minimization of Algerians. Under constant surveillance, torture, and repression, the colonial space becomes a site where Algerians wage a shadow war for survival: *"Surveillance of the refuge had been organized"* (AF, 1995: 167). Reduced to a life of clandestinity, Algerians must survive in a space overtly hostile to their existence, facing military raids that leave scorched earth behind: *"Up there, 'France' keeps the fire burning every day. It scatters women and children onto the roads and into the mud. The raids multiply in the village markets"* (AF, 1995: 172). The association of the terms *"fire"* and *"raid"* highlights not only the brutality of the colonial space but also the methods of razzia employed by the colonizer. This is made all the more visceral when a female figure declares: *"They were burning us"* (AF, 1995: 133). This verbal phrase *"They were burning us"* echoes throughout the novel and conveys the intense violence produced by the colonial space, symbolized in this context by fire. A fire that devours everything in its path, it leaves behind residues in the minds of Algerians, psychic scars that continue to haunt the people. It is a fire that transcends time. Djebar reinforces this idea when she writes that to write the war is to come face to face with death (AF, 1995: 93).

Just like the colonial space, the patriarchal space is a site of confinement, surveillance, and oppression. In Djebar's novel, it is symbolized by the veil, the harem, and social scrutiny. The spatial reality of Algerian women is marked by prohibitions, a kind of closed circuit intended to produce women according to the patriarchal model. The harem thus emerges as the quintessential pictorial representation of this alienating and repressive space. This is made particularly evident by the narrator's representation of this world: *"Then things resume their course in the flow of a day immobilized in the interiors of houses, always interiors, naturally."* (AF, 1995: 32) Here, the adverbs *"always"* and *"naturally,"* along with the noun *"interior,"* reveal the oppressive and traumatizing nature of this space: a closed-off enclosure, disconnected from the outside world. In this highly surveilled universe, boys enjoy a space of freedom, while girls are trapped. The narrator gives voice to the cries of distress from girls held hostage behind the walls in the following lines: *"We girls cannot go to that store,*

it's right across from the Moorish café!" (AF, 1995: 33). Girls are thus spatially repressed and forced to live in veiled spaces (the harem). This spatial minimization becomes even more significant when it transcends the physical realm and manifests in language itself. Indeed, Algerian women, when referring to their husbands, are required to use linguistic formulations, such as *"Hadj,"* as a way of showing respect. The disaster revealed by both colonial and patriarchal spaces is poetically rendered by Djebar through the lens of traumatic sensory memories.

1. On Traumatic Sensory Memory

Assia Djebar brings the colonial trauma to the surface by giving voice to traumatic sensory memories in her novel. She probes memory traces, understood as "witnesses of lost trajectories" (Chamoiseau, 1997: 120), in order to reveal the true nature of the catastrophe. This trauma is particularly evident in the text through the sense of hearing. Analysis of the corpus reveals a cacophony that conveys the unspeakable. Within this cacophony, the first cry is that of the French colonizers, a sadistic cry of pleasure derived from the suffering inflicted on the Algerians, expressed in the following excerpt: *"And these modern officers, cavalry aristocrats so efficiently armed, at the head of thousands of infantrymen from all sides, these crusaders of the colonial century overwhelmed by so many clamors, feed upon this sonorous thickness."* (AF, 1995: 70). The cries of joy are manifested here through the words *"clamors"* and *"sonorous"*. This celebration of the French soldiers' bravery amid Algerian corpses was already reflected in the words of Joseph Bosquet cited by Djebar: "Our little army is in joy and feasts [...]" (AF, 1995: 67). Through the aesthetic of disaster-made possible by contrasting constructions such as "feast" / "corpses" and "black sun," Djebar attempts to reconstruct, from these traces, the sadism that animated the French colonizers. In response to the cynicism of the French colonizers, Djebar questions: "From this prelude, a black sun kindles! [...] But why, above the corpses that will traverse the successive battlefields, does this first Algerian campaign make us hear the sounds of an obscene copulation?" (AF, 1995: 29). This rhetorical question, conveying Djebar's indignation, foreshadows the cries of the martyred Algerians.

Alongside the cries of joy from the French colonizers emerge the deathly cries of the Algerian people. Within the corpus, a layer of cries is woven that not only illustrates the screams of the buried Algerians but also those of the descendants, traumatically haunted by this enduring legacy. These traumatic cries are exemplified in the passage: "I dream of my paternal grandmother; I relive the day of her death. I am both the six-year-old girl who lived through that mourning and the woman who dreams and suffers each time from this dream." (AF, 1995: 217). This grandmother, now resting in heaven, continues to haunt the narrator with cries:

"I scream in the present, and the dream, as profuse as a fog, seems never to end. A cry of oceanic depth. My grandmother, I carry her like a burden on my shoulders [...]" (AF, 1995: 217). The narrator thus experiences an emotional chaos that is encapsulated in the phrase *"A cry of oceanic depth"* (AF, 1995: 217). Like Djebar herself, thousands of Algerian orphans carry the burden of their ancestors lost to war. Just as this mute grandmother's cries are reborn through her daughter, the thousands of silent Algerians, lost in the silence of history, are reborn today through the traumatic dreams of their descendants. The *"funereal howls"* and *"cries"* of Algerian women continue to mark the horror of this disaster. Djebar writes on this subject:

> The blood that spurts has simultaneously made the guerrillas follow behind. They now know whom to accompany: the rhythmic howling of the unburied dead who return, the call of vanished lionesses, untouched by any hunter […] Above the abyss, the men stare at her: enduring the cries that sway like the swinging of a blood-stained cloth dripping in the sun. The corpse, for its part, wraps itself, seems to regain memory: miasma, gurgling. It is flooded with a suffocating soundness. (AF, 1995: 140-141).

Thus, the Algerians burned in caves, mutilated and shot down by colonial artillery, live on in dreams within the psyche of the heirs of this colonial barbarity.

Just as the Algerian people cry out in response to the forced invasion of the colonial power, Algerian women also scream following the mutilation of their bodies by men. This mutilation is first and foremost vocal: "The violence of her persecuted voice paralyzes us. As adults, we do not know how to protect ourselves with protective spells […]" (AF, 1995: 18-19). The woman thus emits a lamenting cry through her mutilated voice. The paradox of "mutilation/cry" expresses not only pain but also the resilience of the woman in the face of oppression. In other words, this mutilated voice that utters cries of lament reveals the emotional chaos of the woman and the necessity to conceive of a new presence in the world. This becomes even more significant when the scene of defloration depicts an image of mutilation completely devoid of any pleasure: "And I cautiously come to the cry of defloration, the surroundings of childhood evoked in this symbolic journey. More than twenty years later, the cry seems to erupt from the past: a sign neither of pain nor of amazement… Theft of the hollowed-out voice […] A cry without fantasia […]" (AF, 1995: 122). Thus, the woman, led to the slaughterhouse, forbidden to cry and subjected to the scrutiny of "serious eyes" (AF, 1995: 122), inevitably suffers a trauma from which she cannot free herself, as evidenced by Djebar's own testimony in the cited passage.

In her work, which serves to reveal the traumatic disaster orchestrated by the various oppressions suffered by the Algerian people, Djebar also uses smell to expose the disaster that haunts people of Algerian descent. In the corpus, smell is used to denounce not only the inhumanity of the French colonists, but also the unspeakable orchestrated by the colonial catastrophe. Despite the passage of time, Algerian subjects seem to instantly relive the colonial horror through the smell of bodies that have been dried, burned, gassed, or thrown into the sea. This traumatic sensory memory is confirmed in this excerpt: "Above the abyss, men stare at her: matching the duration of the cry that sways, like the swaying of a sheet of blood dripping in the sun. The corpse, meanwhile, wraps itself up, seems to regain its memory: miasma, gurgling. It is flooded with sonorous stuffiness. The vibration of stridulation, the rhythm of the declaration languish its flesh to ward off decomposition" (AF, 1995:140-141). Thus, these bodies abandoned in the open air decompose while emitting foul odors that perpetually haunt Algerian subjects. This trace of memory can be read more clearly in this passage:

> Victory seemed to have been won on the cliffs. However, the next day, June 23rd, nature took its revenge: the smell of death was so strong (the crows and vultures continued to swarm over the ravine; and the soldiers even saw the birds carrying away human remains!) that Pélissier gave the order, on that very day, to move the camp half a league further away… like the sun, the heavy summer, and the landscape were driving out the French army. They had to leave, the smell was too strong. The memory, how could one get rid of it? The bodies exposed to the sun; now they have become words (AF, 1995: 89).

Thus, the transcription of these timeless odors into words allows Djebar to summon the trauma that haunts many Algerians. This unforgettable smell travels from the realm os sensation onto the page, filling not only the blank spaces of history but also helping the traumatic subject reconcile with themselves. Expressing the unspeakable becomes a necessity for survival, and naming it an act of liberation for "the word is a torch" (AF, 1995: 75). This "torch-word," which both exposes trauma and frees the subject, also serves in Djebar's novel to illuminate the catastrophe in its vivid, almost pictorial force.

Fantasia'sgaze recreates the colonial space and its horror. By intersecting the gaze of the French colonizer, the gaze of the Algerian heroines, and her own authorial gaze, Djebar reconstructs the scene of the colonial crime. Through the eyes of characters such as Bosquet and Pélissier, for example, we witness scenes of Algerians being burned in caves, and the entire chain of barbarity that accompanies this violence. Pélissier's own words, as recorded by Djebar, lay bare the cruelty: " - Take them out into the sun! Count them! Perhaps, during his inspection, he might have brusquely added with relentless cruelty: 'Let's bring out these savages, even if they're stiff or rotting, and then we will have won, we will have reached the end!'" (AF, 1995: 87).

The analysis of the expressions "take them out into the sun," "count them," and "let's take out these savages" reveals how the French colonizer turns atrocity into spectacle, displaying Algerian corpses as war trophies. Such scenes of deadly display continue to haunt many Algerians, whose trauma is exemplified here by the nature of the crime, which could only leave fragments in its victims. This representation of colonial horror through the gaze is conveyed with pictorial vocabulary: "naked corpses," "piled one upon another," and "among the animals, often even beneath them, lie the bodies of women, children […]." Through these words and images, the Algerian writer exposes a colonial catastrophe that had long slumbered in the blank spaces of History.

The inscription of colonial trauma in the senses—hearing, smell, taste, and sight—allows Djebar not only to convey the profound wounds inflicted on the victims but also to expose the specter that continues to haunt her as a writer. She writes:

> To read this writing, I must turn my body over, plunge my face into the shadows, scrutinize the vault of rocks or chalk, let the immemorial whispers rise, a bloody-stained geology. What magma of sounds rots there, what smell of putrefaction escapes from it? I fumble, my sense of smell disturbed, my ears open like oysters, in the flood of ancient pain. Alone, stripped bare, unveiled, I face the images of darkness... Beyond the centuries of yesterday, how to confront the sounds of the past?... What love is sought, what future is sketched despite the call of the dead, and my body rings with the long collapse of ancestor-generations? (AF, 1995: 58)

The sensory organs compel Djebar to relive again and again this traumatic episode in her country's history, hence the imperative to exhume it and bring it to light. This sensory exhumation of colonial trauma is all the more crucial given that the raids orchestrated by the colonizer not only inflicted violence but also sought to erase memory itself, plunging the victims into a profound, almost absolute darkness.

The Erasure of Histories

Beyond the traumatic experience of the horror of colonial violence, the erasure of memory, which was also at the core of this conquest, constitutes a trauma in itself. This erasure stems not only from the methods of colonial conquest but also from the way the colonial experience has been and continues to be narrated. This war, which appears "mute, without writing, without a time of writing" (AF, 1995: 68) for the colonizer, because it is based on raids characterized in the novel by fire, gas, cannon, and explosions, has orchestrated the disappearance of lineages that remain untraceable to this day. The controversy over the number of victims attests to this fact. This erasure is metaphorically represented in Djebar's text by "fire," the ultimate symbol of obliteration: "they were burning us" (AF, 1995: 133). This recurring phrase throughout the novel conveys not only the violence of the colonial conquest but also the erasure of what could serve as memorials, notably historical data. The thousands of missing persons (Yacono, 1982: 120) plunge not only the victims into a dead end but also the entire Algerian nation, as starting anew from a history marked by gaps proves nearly impossible. Anne Donadey (2001: 1) refers to this erasure as "historical amnesia." By *historical amnesia*, one must understand the deliberate absence of information about the colonial disaster—an absence produced by methods of erasure, most strikingly the fire and mass graves evoked in *Fantasia*.

According to Donadey (2001: 1), "In Algeria, that war has been constructed as the great trauma of the birth of an independent nation." This figure of trauma surrounding the emergence of the Algerian state becomes even more troubling when the colonial narrative itself contributes to erasure. Within those narratives, Algerians appear only as embodiments of savagery and inhumanity—a dynamic that Fanon (2002: 285) identifies as the "syndrome of the Algerian man." Djebar names this process the "mutilation of memory" (AF, 1995: 12). In the colonizers' texts and on the battlefields alike, Algerians are rendered invisible; their history and culture

are disfigured and reshaped to fit the colonizer's desires, where the Algerian exists merely as an abstraction, an "invisible fanatic." This mutilation is especially profound in the case of Algerian women, who were central figures of resistance in the struggle for independence yet remain almost entirely absent from colonial accounts.

Algerian women, like the Algerian people as a whole, are erased from the colonial narrative. In their case, however, the erasure is not merely symbolic but almost total. Regarded as "weak" beings and confined to the "harem," they are absent from citations in colonial texts; their agency is systematically excluded from the narratives of war. Donadey (2001: 48) underscores this invisibility: "Algerian women, kept in homes, were, for the most part, invisible to the French soldiers, and because of the veil, they were also rendered invisible to most Algerian men." The erasure deepens after independence, when the National Liberation Front (FLN), once in power, reproduces colonial ideology by relegating women back to the domestic sphere (Donadey, 2021: 1). Through this policy of enforced domesticity, the FLN orchestrates a second silencing of Algerian women, denying the heroic role they played in the struggle for liberation and erasing an entire segment of national history. Confronting this double effacement, Djebar develops a poetics that rewrites colonial history and restores visibility to the Algerian people—and especially to Algerian women—in an effort to overcome the trauma born of this historical catastrophe.

Confronting Colonial Trauma: A Poetic Resilience

In her quest for an escape from the trauma caused by the colonial disaster, Djebar embarks on a kind of geological excavation, an effort to write into the silences of history. This geological study is centered on the analysis of *magma*, which, in Djebar's novel, symbolizes not only the difficulty of writing the past but also the possibility of recreating it. The word *magma*, of Greek origin, means "paste" (pâte) or "mixture." Given that the colonial catastrophe has no reliable archive other than the very soil formed by the decomposition of massacred Algerians and the blood spilled, Djebar turns this magma into both the site and the language of a psychoanalytic process capable of healing wounds. She writes: "To read this writing, I must turn my body over, plunge my face into shadows, scrutinize the vault of rocks or chalk, let the immemorial whispers to rise, blood-stained geology. What magma of sounds rots there, what smell of putrefaction escapes from it? I fumble, my sense of smell disturbed, my ears open like oysters, in the flood of ancient pain. Alone, stripped bare, unveiled, I face the images of darkness […]" (AF, 1995: 58). By studying this *magma* formed during the colonial disaster, Djebar inscribes her text into its geography, thereby developing a *geopoetics*. This geopoetics involves the anthropomorphization of the land, evidenced by the fact that this mass of earth emits sounds and odors. The magma, which expresses "ancient pain," becomes a means of writing the unspeakable. This aesthetic, which Djebar theorizes in the section titled *"Erasure…,"* is especially enacted in the second part of the novel, through descriptions of odors, deathly sounds, and the graphic representation of crimes committed by the colonizer, as discussed earlier. Such an aesthetic allows Djebar to overcome the trauma of erasure, of the lack of historical data, and of the colonial narrative that renders Algerians invisible. Through her analysis of magma, she is able to exhume the buried pages of colonial history. The magma thus becomes a subtext, a pastiche of the colonial past, decoded and transcribed through the writer's sensory organs. As Kenneth White (2024) states, "A poem is a way of listening to, understanding, and speaking the language of the world." Djebar's *Fantasia* speaks the language of colonial magma. By intertwining this analysis of magma with the resurrection of the voices of buried heroines, she adds a distinctive and powerful dimension to her geopoetics.

To overcome colonial trauma, Djebar resurrects the voices of plural heroines, silenced or assassinated by colonial war, colonial discourse, and patriarchy. By allowing us to hear the voices of women enduring martyrdom in the midst of war in the third part of the novel, Djebar simultaneously introduces, through orality, the terrifying sounds of colonial horror: "[…] O my sister, where did they take you? I looked at her without answering. He continued, hastily: "Do you know so-and-so, and so-and-so...?" I said yes, for my mistrust

had disappeared. I was taken back for interrogation. I responded in the same way I had in Cherchell. They used electricity again. One time, it lasted from dawn until two in the afternoon [...]" (AF, 1995: 155). Vocal orality thus becomes a means of writing the disaster. By narrating these traumatic events through the voices of heroines who endured both the war and its official historiography, Djebar not only brings them back to life but also succeeds in articulating the unspeakable. Sound, here, becomes a vehicle for moving beyond the historical silences and for recreating a feminine voice long buried beneath colonial and patriarchal narratives.

Through the parallel lenses of colonization and patriarchy, we previously noted that women are objectified and their agency erased, both in postcolonial Algerian society and in colonial narratives. This fantasized gaze stands in stark contrast to the colonial reality: women transcended their domestic roles and rose up as warriors to liberate Algeria from French domination. Aware of this truth, Djebar reconstructs the voice of the Algerian woman in order to repair the harm caused by her assassination, both literal and symbolic. This restoration unfolds through the figure of the storyteller. By resurrecting the heroines of the past, Djebar not only rehabilitates them but also sanctifies their speech, casting them as guardians of memory, as the living archive of a silenced past: "I imagine you, the unknown woman still spoken of as a storyteller during the century that led to the years of my childhood. For I, too take my place in the immutable circle of listeners, near the Menacer Mountains… I recreate you, the invisible one, as you travel with others to Île Sainte-Marguerite, to the prisons made famous by "the man in the iron mask" [...] I bring you back to life, during this crossing that no letter from a French warrior will ever evoke [...]" (AF, 1995: 214). In Djebar's words, we witness a transcendence of death itself, writing becomes an act of resurrection or reincarnation. In this scriptural mystery, "the word is made flesh," illuminating the shadows of the past and liberating not only the women chained within History, but also the writer herself, haunted by their suffering.

These women, whose speech was censored, mutilated, and banned, find another form of existence within the alternative world woven by Djebar's poetic tapestry. They speak out and name reality, for "the word is torch" (AF, 1995: 75), and thus, it is a source of liberation: "The orchards burned by Saint-Arnaud finally see their fire extinguished, because the old woman speaks today, and I transcribe her story. Counting the small objects that passed in this way, from feverish hand to fugitive hand!" (AF, 1995: 200–201). Analyzing the narrator's words reveals that Djebar positions herself as the conduit for the "whispers" of Algerian heroines, whispers that transcend time and are passed from one generation to the next. The act of voicing these experiences in the public sphere not only grants legitimacy to female speech but also bestows upon it an agency powerful enough to shape a new mode of existence in the world.

From Aesthetic Catastrophe to a New Way of Being in the World

The aesthetic treatment of colonial trauma and the attempt by Djebar to transcend this existential catastrophe allow us to identify the construction of an aesthetics of catastrophe. By aesthetics of catastrophe, we mean the use of disaster as a source of artistic expression. Given the magnitude of the colonial catastrophe experienced by the Algerian people, Djebar's poetic approach suggests that "only an aesthetics of catastrophe can disarm it" (Chamoiseau, 2021: 161). This aesthetic choice, expressed in the novel through the sublimation of language, explicitly marked by the phrase "Algérie-Femme" (Algeria-Woman), enables Djebar to cleanse the page of the past in order to initiate a new beginning. She disarms the colonial language, the French colonizers, and, most crucially, the colonial discourse itself. She shatters silence and breaks the patriarchal chains that render Algerian women invisible. Thus, beyond the aesthetic representation of catastrophe, Djebar transforms the cries of Algerian women into speech. This shift from emotional expression to embodied voice allows the author to dismantle the vertical hierarchy between women and men, between Algerians and the French. By rooting her discourse in nature, Djebar challenges the colonial society based on "root identity" (Glissant, 1990:

29) and promotes a "rhizomatic identity" (Glissant, 1990: 31) within a relational world. In other words, her poetics anticipates an alternative way of being in the world: the relational being. The invocation of nature, the use of orality, and the parody of colonial discourse serve the necessity of facing and transcending catastrophe so that an eco-world might be born. By recreating "living language, [by inventing] a burial for the disappeared (bodies, names, lands)," Djebar turns textuality into a site of memory that resists erasure (AF, 1995: 81). She transforms textuality into a space that sketches a new world: through polyphony, multilingualism, orality, and geopoetics, Djebar makes literature a laboratory for the creation of a new being. This new Algerian being embraces their history, transcends taboos, empties the page, and enters into a relational becoming, of which Djebar's own Franco-Algerian identity is the perfect illustration. Now a plural being, the Algerian lives in Relation, as Glissant conceptualizes it. In her textual space, Djebar accomplishes the realization of an alterity censored by politics. This alterity is first experienced within oneself (between the self and the past) and then with others. Karima Lazali (2018: 26–27) captures this idea perfectly: "Writing in Algerian literature serves as a conduit for censored languages and confiscated dreams. It is therefore a question of making a rejected alterity live in writing, an alterity that, elsewhere, is suppressed by politics. For this, writers subtly practice the art of diversion. They invent a way of using language that becomes a subterfuge." *Fantasia* thus emerges as the space where a censored Relation, repressed by both history and politics, can finally be realized.

Conclusion

Fantasia stages a poetic weaving that not only recreates the colonial context by exhuming traumatic experiences but also simultaneously fills in the silences and absences of History. Drawing from memory-traces such as space, sensory memory, and historiography, Djebar brings colonial trauma back to the surface while proposing paths toward its transcendence. In the face of the dilemma posed by the absence of historical data, the novelist, through her poetic weaving, reinvents the scenes of catastrophe. This poetics enables the resurrection of heroines buried beneath the rubble of History. The transmutation of colonial violence into speech, both revelatory of a historical moment and generative of new ways of inhabiting the world, offers the possibility of surpassing the unspeakable. By inscribing her novel within alterity and Relation, Djebar dismantles the oppressive chains of colonization and patriarchy, and calls for the emergence of an eco-world.

At a time when many formerly enslaved and colonized peoples face the absence of historical records that would allow them to write a decolonized, non-masculinist memory, Djebar offers an alternative path through her poetics: reading the unspoken of colonial writings, and mobilizing our sensory organs to receive and transcribe the whispers, smells, and cries that the magma of these catastrophes still echoes back to us. This poetics, which is inherently transdisciplinary, drawing from historiography, geography, psychoanalysis, literature, among others, makes *Fantasia* a foundational text, not only because it deconstructs classical literary norms by transforming the novel into a laboratory for historical research and a space of resistance, but also because it demonstrates that our geography itself constitutes a living archive, a witness that remembers and speaks. The poetics of sensory trauma employed by the author invites a rethinking of colonial trauma, not simply as a negative phenomenon, but as a potential language, even a possibility for reconstructing the past through traumatic dreams, lingering sounds, and lingering smells from another time. Far from being just an Algerian novel, this text proposes a new relationship to colonial archives and to the spaces that bear the imprints of colonial presence. It is precisely this line of inquiry that leads Chamoiseau to speak of memory-traces, or "witnesses of lost trajectories" (Chamoiseau, 1997: 120), while also reinventing the figure of the storyteller, revalorized by his predecessor, Djebar.

Finally, by intertwining colonialism and patriarchy, the Official and the Intimate, Djebar's text emerges as an illustrative case of subaltern speech and the female condition in a colonial context. Above all, it serves as a crucial reminder of the need to account for the double oppression of women in memorial practices, not only within colonial contexts, but also within contemporary capitalist and neoliberal societies.

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The Power of Water

A Message to the Future from Ousmane Sembène

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Abstract

In the film *Xala* (1975), Senegalese auteur Ousmane Sembène launches a biting critique of a post-colonial African elite trapped in Eurocentric economic flows despite the arrival of political independence. The plastic Evian bottle that appears and reappears throughout the film symbolizes the African elite class's slavish commitment to European mores and values. In *Xala*, independence has not reached the consumption habits of the African men who lead the nation, nor their families. Fifty years after *Xala's* debut, Sembène's critique of an African freedom that does not attend to consumption and class is only more piercing. Now, *Xala's* fetishized Evian bottle appears less like a satirized habit and more like a harbinger of the coming ecological disaster. This article reads *Xala's* ubiquitous Evian bottle through twenty-first century eyes. I use contemporary discussions about plastic, waste colonialism, and water privatization in West Africa to illuminate the enduring knowledge of filmmaker Ousmane Sembène and his film, *Xala.*

Keywords: Postcolonial Critique, Consumer Colonialism, Ousmane Sembène, Plastic Waste, Xala

Message to the Future

For almost a decade I screened Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* (1975) in a course about modern African politics. In my syllabus, we watch *Xala* after discussing the stirring political visions of anticolonial thinkers like Kwame Nkrumah, Amilcar Cabral, and Frantz Fanon. Then comes *Xala*, a film that propels students into the frustrations of national independence. What went wrong when European colonialism ended? What factors shape African countries' trajectory from colony to nation-state to neo colony? *Xala* provides one set of answers through the story of fictional businessman El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, a leader in the new economic and political dispensation of post-independence Senegal. El Hadji is part of an elite class of businessmen-politicians who make speeches about the importance of "Africanité!" and still accept briefcases stuffed with money from a French man lurking at their shoulder. He lives in a Dakar city of contrasts. We witness his life of high consumption and in the next frame, view a group of impoverished and disabled citizens moving through the streets in search of sustenance. When El Hadji marries a third wife, his wedding night is marred by *xala*, a curse of sexual impotence. Suddenly, his wealth and status are of no use. As he searches for a cure, the vices of the African bourgeois class and the failures of political independence are on display.

One semester, while discussing *Xala's* visual language, a student asked me about Ousmane Sembène the environmentalist. She perceived a plastic Evian bottle that appears multiple times in the film as an indictment of plastic waste pollution. For this student– a sustainability studies major staring down climate catastrophe– the scourge of single-use plastic flowing from Europe and North America and congealing as waste in African waters and lands was a topic that she knew something about.[1] To her eyes, *Xala* was a prescient warning. She wanted to know: when Ousmane Sembène placed the Evian bottle in a film about the disillusionments of national independence, was he divining the future? Almost five decades after *Xala's* debut, Senegal would pass a law banning the import, sale, and stocking of single use plastics.[2] Did Sembène peer into the future and see the coming flood? Could he perceive the future presence of Modou Fall, an environmental activist who walks the city of Dakar as "L'homme Plastique"? Elaborately outfitted from head to toe in the detritus of global plastic waste, Modou Fall roams Dakar's beaches warning all who will listen about the harm of plastic waste. Meanwhile, children call out that L'homme Plastique is *Kankurang*, a Senegambian spirit of order, justice and protection.[3]

In this inaugural issue of *Bokutani: The Journal of the African Studies Association of Africa,* our task is to interrogate and uplift African ecologies of knowledge. I immediately think of *Xala*, the Evian bottle, and my student's sense that the illustrious Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène was calling out to her, across decades and distances, about the plastic pollution crisis. The meaning of *Xala* (1975) continues to unspool, the shadow of Sembène's analysis lengthening as new generations rise. These messages to the future from our African knowledge-creators are a gift; they also require something of us. The Evian bottle is just one of many ways that Ousmane Sembène's film grows more relevant with the passage of time. The year 2025 is *Xala's* half-century anniversary and Sembène's spotlight on the follies and tribulations of the postindependence Senegalese elite dazzles. The film's muted colors have deepened into a shout. The class of political elites that Sembène roasts in the film is now neither novel nor marginal. Their consumption habits have been redefined by subsequent generations as the substance of a "good life". Still, *Xala's* message is there: our commodity fetish, our hunger for the economic and cultural markets dominated by Euro-American capital is part of what ails us. It is the sickness afflicting our bodies, our national politics, and our natural environment. If this needed to be said in 1975, in 2025 it must be trumpeted from the rooftops.

1 Alaine Hutson, "In the Ocean: Senegal's Plastic Waste Problem" *Africa Today* 68:1, 2021.
2 https://www.au-senegal.com/IMG/pdf/loi-plastique-senegal-2020-04.pdf.
3 Leo Corrál, "'Plastic Man' in Senegal on mission against trash– in pictures," *The Guardian*, 11/21/2022. Camara, Mady, and Ruth Maclean. "This 'plastic Man' Has a Cape and a Superhero's Mission: Cleaning up Senegal." The New York Times, 20 Jan. 2022.

Meeting Sembène

Predicting the future was not out of the ordinary for Ousmane Sembène (1923 - 2007). Over eight decades of life, the Senegalese writer and filmmaker created with intention and speed, pouring his insights and questions into ten books of fiction (novels and short stories) and eighteen films– four shorts, ten features and four documentaries.[4] At his death, the liberal United States newspaper, The New York Times, dubbed him "by consensus, the father of African cinema."[5] If Sembène is to be dubbed a patriarchal progenitor, it must also be said that his own political vision directly contradicts this Eurocentric obsession with individual firsts, bests, and mosts. Sembène created a production company, Filmi Domirew, a filmmaking labor union, a film festival (FESPACO - the Panafrican Festival of Cinema at Ouagadougou), and *Kaddu*, a Wolof newspaper. His artistic work grew out of his political convictions, and these, in turn, grew out of his life experience as a subject of the French colonial empire. After fighting for France in the 1940's, Sembène became a dockworker in Marseilles and joined the French Communist Party in the 1950s. He protested Europe's imperial aggression in Algeria, Korea, and Indochina and studied filmmaking in Moscow. Eventually, he returned to Senegal, determined to play his role in building a new Africa.[6]

For Sembène, art, literature and film were strategies for social renewal and political education. "Mine is a class struggle, it is a fact of life for me, there is no point in denying it. Even when I'm dead, I want everybody to get this fact straight."[7] Gratitude for Sembène, who preemptively resisted the critics, textbooks, and biographers who would seek to separate his work from its political purpose, pinning the African artist behind glass!

4 Samba Gadijgo, "A Tribute to Ousmane Sembène" *Framework: the Journal of Cinema and Media*, 2008: 31.
5 A. B. Assensoh & Yvette M. Alex-Assensoh, "A Farewell Salute to Ousmane Sembène…" in Cole and Diop, Ousmane Sembène: Writer, Filmmaker, Revolutionary Artist, Africa World Press, 2016: 429.
6 Samba Gadjigo and Sada Niang, "Dossier 2: Ousmane Sembène" *Black Camera*:12: 2, 2021: 452.
7 Gadjigo and Niang, 2021: 465.

Sembène self- fashioning is among his most beautiful creations. Scholars Ernest Cole and Oumar Cherif Diop define him as "a committed revolutionary artist and trade union organizer."[8] For U.S. actor and activist Danny Glover, Sembène is "a visionary who understood the power of imagination as a form of resistance against the colonizer…"[9] Sembène's biographer, professor Samba Gadjigo, describes his muse within a broader African tradition of socially-relevant creators. "The artist is the one who prepares a revolution, the one who incites it. I would go further. Even in the middle of a revolution, the true artist is the one who prepares the next revolution…"[10] Novelist Akin Adesokan marvels at Sembène's "radicalism of spirit": "the older he got the more radical he became."[11] For over fifty years, scholars and artists who dare to take the measure of Sembène's cloth cannot help but call it revolutionary.

Fiercely outspoken, Sembène's chosen churlishness exposes the traps baiting African artists then and now. Here he is, responding to an interview question about how his films are received in Europe: "L'Europe n'est pas mon centre…. Pourquoi voulez-vous que je sois comme le tournesol qui tourne autour du soleil? Ju suis moi-meme le soleil!"[12] There he is at the 1979 FESPACO in Ouagadougou warning his fellow creators that they are "increasingly treading on a dangerous path." They are at risk, he says, of succumbing to commercialism and creating "stale sentimental slush… shallow and devoid of any substance, albeit impeccably shot."[13] In the same speech he issues another warning. "[I]n the next decade or so, we are going to see Africans putting out European content for other Africans, that is, they are going to peddle Western cultural products to you and me, whilst making you believe it is still African."[14] The future Sembène warned against is the present we now live. With platforms like Netflix marketing Africa, global access to South African, Nigerian, Ghanaian, or Zimbabwean film is controlled by the profit motive of multinational companies. Streaming services have made films featuring African actors, settings, and languages easier to access than ever before. African movies are no longer something "that one must 'find'; now they are something that one 'receives.'[15] Still, Sembène's warning rings in our ears. If the production, marketing, distribution and preservation of so-called African cinema now lies with Netflix, a multinational behemoth able to dominate locally controlled and indigenous platforms, there is a risk that the world of African film becomes whatever Netflix decides it should be.[16] "The thieves and crooks of today are going to be the film producers of tomorrow," Sembène warns. "With all their accumulated ill-gotten wealth, they are going to fund films, on condition that they exert absolute control over the whole process."[17] The artist Ousmane Sembène did not hesitate to speak as an oracle.

For Ousmane Sembène, no social institution– neither mosque, nor the traditional shrine, neither the French colonial state nor postcolonial Senegalese nation, neither "traditional" heritage nor religious reformers– was beyond scrutiny, question, or reproach. This dockworker-turner writer-turned filmmaker saw the problem of oppression as complex and many-sided. His goal was clear: to "participate in the liberation of Africa and in the building of an African nation, through art."[18] Having articulated this purpose, an unflinching Sembène exposed

8 Cole and Diop, "Introduction" in *Ousmane Sembène: Writer, Filmmaker, Revolutionary Artist*, Africa World Press, 2016:1.
9 Danny Glover, "Foreward" in *Ousmane Sembène: The Making of a Militant Artist*, Indiana University Press, 2010: xi
10 Gadjigo, 2008: 31.
11 Akin Adesokan, "The Significance of Ousmane Sembène, " *World Literature Today* 2008: 37.
12 Férid Boughedir, Caméra d'Afrique (African Cinema: Filming Against All Odds) 1983. "Europe is not my center…Why should I be like the sunflower that revolves around the sun? I myself am the sun!" https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=foQ0q4w6z4Q
13 Ousmane Sembène, "Statement at Ougadougou" (1979) in Black Camera 2021: 471.
14 Ousmane Sembène, "Statement at Ougadougou" (1979) in Black Camera 2021: 473.
15 Alexander Fisher, "Netflix and Africa: Streaming, branding and tastemaking in non-domestic African film markets " in *World Cinema on demand: global film cultures in the era of online distribution*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022: 191.
16 The example of the African Film Library, an initiative by South African distributor and channel M-Net, is instructive. According to Fisher (2022) "The AFL promised to offer over 600 African films for streaming on demand. African Film Library's inventory was drawn predominantly from the canon of African auteur-based films, represented by the likes of Ousmane Sembène, Idrissa Oudraogo and Djibril Diop Mambety. Had it been successful, the website would have offered a comprehensive cross-section of African film history, but unfortunately the project was abandoned before the site was even functional."
17 Sembène, "Statement at Ougadougou" in Black Camera, 2021: 474.
18 Samba Gadjigo and Sada Niang, "Sembène's Legacy to FESPACO" Black Camera 12:2, 2021: 451.

the different types of violence that kept Africa and Africans in chains. French colonialism was bloodthirsty and hypocritical. *La Noire de… Black Girl* (1966) is a treatise on the plight of a domestic migrant worker who achieves her dream of moving to France and finds it is a nightmare. *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988) is also about colonial betrayal, this time regarding the West African troops who fought for France in World War II and returned to colonial repression. However, in Sembène's oeuvre, European colonization is not the sole oppressor. *Guelwaar* (1993) names the crime of African "state begging," euphemistically called global aid or international development.[19] The culminating scene in another film, the controversial *Ceddo* (1977) shows the regally dressed Wolof princess shooting and killing the imam who has introduced Islam, and disorder, to her community. The masterpieces *Faat Kiné* (2001) and *Moolade* (2004) reveal patriarchy's distortion within Senegalese society. In Sembène's "evening school" of cinema, the curriculum must be rigorous! "We have to be daring and reconquer our cultural and cinematographic space. To defend our countries, our villages, our homes, from the invader is an act of heroism. It is even more noble to be strongminded enough to fight imposture and iniquity at home."[20] As an artist who dared to pursue his purpose with nuance and complexity, Ousmane Sembène and his films speak boldly into our present contradictions.

Fighting the many faces of African exploitation and oppression requires deliberateness in both practice and message. Initially a novelist writing in French, Sembène Ousmane learned filmmaking to reach more people in a country (Senegal) and a continent (Africa) where literacy in European languages may function as an obstacle to collective understanding and cooperation. Sembène was not interested in "making cinema for my buddies or for a limited circle of specialists. What I'm interested in is exposing problems of the people to which I belong..."[21] In pursuit of the mass audience, Sembène's films are richly visual. He utilizes African languages and multilingual subtitles to expand understanding, first to the community where he films, and then beyond.[22] Along with utilizing Wolof, Pulaar/Fulani, or Dioula language, Sembène's films are marked by a deliberate and clearly articulated dialogue. The slow speech of his actors, often chalked up to a habit of casting everyday people rather than trained actors in his films, also ensures maximum intelligibility for the multilingual Senegalese audience.[23] These tactics worked. In their time, Sembène's films were locally popular.[24] According to the filmmaker, when *Xala* was first released, "nobody drove a Mercedes Benz in Dakar city for three months."[25]

Xala

Now that you have met Ousmane Sembène, please watch the film *Xala*. In the age of youtube, this fifty-year old Senegalese movie is fairly easy to find, for free, with English or French subtitles.[26] It will take you about two hours to screen. If possible, watch it with at least one other human being. When Sembène made his films, he would screen them in community; he would bring his equipment to small towns and villages and run the tape.[27]

19 Sada Niang, Samba Gadjigo, Ousmane Sembène, "Interview with Ousmane Sembène" *Research in African Literatures* 26: 3 (1995) 174.

20 Ousmane Sembène, "Cinema as Evening School," (1995) in *Black Camera* 12:2, 2021: 461

21 Ousmane Sembène, "Filmmakers Have a Great Responsibility to Our People" Cineaste 6:1 (1973): 27.

22 Michael T. Martin, "On Mediated Solidarity" *Black Camera* 12:2, 2021: 506.

23 Kwate Nee Owoo, "The Language of Real Life: Interview with Ousmane Sembène" *Framework* 36, 1989

24 Ousmane Sembene: An Interview' by G. M. Perry and Patrick McGilligan with Ousmane Sembene in Film *Quarterly* (Vol. 26, No. 3, Spring, 1973) pp. 36-42.

25 Josef Gugler and Oumar Cherif Diop, "Ousmane Sembène's Xala: The Novel, the Film, and their Audiences," *Research in African Literatures* 29:2, 1998: 157.

26 Please note that the English subtitled version of Xala limits the viewer because its subtitles fail to convey whether the characters use Wolof or French when speaking. In addition, the meaningful Wolof songs of the soundtrack are not translated in the subtitles. Please read Gugler and Diop, 1998 for song translations.

27 Jared Rapfogel, Richard Porton and Ousmane Sembène, "The Power of Female Solidarity: An Interview with Ousmane Sembène," *Cineaste* 30:1, 22.

In *Xala's* satire, the Evian bottle is one symbol among many of the distorted values of El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, the character standing in for Senegal's political leaders. El Hadji insists that the impoverished and disabled young men begging on the streets are "human rubbish" who are spoiling our independence and should be deported far away. At the same time, he cherishes Europe-made plastic bottles of water, and their radical expansion of the waste burden.

The Evian bottle appears in three scenes in *Xala's* second hour. First, at minute 82, El Hadji's driver, Modou, takes a 1.5 liter bottle of Evian out of the boot of the Mercedes Benz, opens it, and pours the contents into a plastic bucket. One of the impoverished citizens, recently attacked by state police agents, appears with bandaged forehead to clean El Hadji's car. He picks up a plastic bucket filled with the luxury European mineral water and goes to work! The driver, Modou, opens another bottle of Evian and pours this one directly into the car's engine. In *Xala*, El Hadji's relationship to Evian water is an absurdity. Do imported luxury cars like the German Mercedes Benz require imported water to function? In a scene shot and shown in real time, we see Modou opening the bottle, we hear the sound of Evian water splashing into a blue plastic bucket, and also the sound of the empty plastic bottle when it hits the Dakar street.[28] This is the image Sembène offers: a Senegalese driver pouring French bottled water into a German Mercedes-Benz next to Senegalese citizens begging and singing in Wolof on a Dakar street. This is the distorted cosmopolitanism of the neocolonial era.

The second time we see Evian Water, the bottle sits prominently on the table between El Hadji and his university-educated daughter Rama. When Rama drives from the university to her father's store on a motorbike, her father greets and speaks to her in French. She answers in Wolof. When her father opens and pours a cup of Evian, Rama explains that she "doesn't drink imported water." El Hadji, drinks 2 liters a day; it is his "preferred drink," he theatrically proclaims. The generational and ideological conflict is distilled to the question of Evian. For Rama, Evian's foreign origin and economic context are a problem; this is "imported water." For her father, Evian is valuable precisely because it is foreign. "Even his drinking water comes from Europe!" El Hadji intones meaningfully about a colleague. (1:26:56) During this conversation, the camera pans from father to daughter. When El Hadji is in the frame, he is shown in close-up and the Evian bottle sits prominently by his face. When the camera shifts to Rama, she is also in close-up, but she is positioned in front of a map of Africa. The continent, rendered without any country or colony territories, is artistically drawn in purple, blue, and yellow, perfectly echoing and matching Rama's boubou. If El Hadji is a brand ambassador for the French luxury water Evian, his daughter Rama is repping Africa, envisaged as undivided, whole, and aligned to the aspirations of progressive youth who will parse commodity, custom, and culture.

The third time that we see the Evian bottle is in *Xala's* final scene. The disinherited of Dakar, the so-called "human rubbish" that El Hadji has spent the film orbiting, ignoring, and being frustrated by, have marched to his house and invaded it. They have forced their way into his kitchen, they are sitting in his chairs, they are about to reveal that they are his relatives, his cursers, and his potential healers. During this raid, we see the Evian bottle, presumably one of the two liters that El Hadji boasts he consumes daily, sitting in the fridge. By the end of the scene, El Hadji realizes that all that he possesses – the contents of the fridge, the foreign foods, the three-piece suit, the briefcase and its contents, Evian Water— ultimately cannot break the *xala.* To be made well, the liquid to which he must submit, finally, is the phlegm of his disinherited relatives. In *Xala's* last freeze frame, sputum, expelled by the so-called human rubbish and spewed on El Hadji's naked body with maximum visual and sound impact, is finally his cure.

28 Teshome Gabriel, "Xala: A Cinema of Wax and Gold" *Presence Africaine* 116, 1980: 213.

Plastic Bottles of Water

In my course lectures about *Xala*, I describe the plastic Evian bottle as a symbol of the African bourgeoisie's disordered attachment to anything and everything that is from abroad, and specifically European. The theatrical performance of *l'independence*, communicated by a frantically jubilant drum and dance scene at the film's beginning, does not shift economic relations or consumer desire. Wealthy Africans in Sembène's film continue to crave European products even as their own land and resources have been devalued, exploited, and sold at a pittance. Sembène's critique of the colonial hangover has been articulated by scholars of African literature, film, and politics.[29] However, my 21st century student asked me to consider the Evian bottle not only as an analogy, a symbol of neocolonialism, but as a material itself.

As one of the most recognized global bottled water brands, Evian is featured in twentieth century films and novels as the quintessential luxury product. A story-myth about European history, wealth, and healing is central to the brand identity.[30] Supposedly, in 1789, the Marquis de Lessert, a Frenchman suffering from kidney stones, discovered the healing effects of the Cachat Spring while walking in the Alps. Subsequently, French nobility and Europe's upper classes traveled to the region to take the waters as a curative aid.[31] Evian continues to deploy this narrative of European health and wealth to sell its product.[32] Even today, the taste and smell of the city of Paris's water is measured and checked against Evian.[33] In *Xala*'s cinemascape, El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye's praise of Evian water is ironic. Are the waters of Evian-les-bains able to restore a man suffering from the Wolof *xala?* Meanwhile, what is the state of Senegal's waters?

The plastic Evian bottle that El Hadji clutches and venerates (and which Rama refuses) is the creation of Danone, formerly known as BSN group, one of the four transnational food and beverage corporations that dominate global markets. The innovation of plastic polyethylene terephthalate (PET) water bottles dates from the 1980s, but Sembène's *Xala* was released first in 1975.[34] The film is a glimpse into the prehistory of bottled water. Before *Xala* was a film, it was a novella published in 1973. Evian bottled water does not appear in this novella; elite foreign consumption is displayed differently. Why does Ousmane Sembène feature Evian bottled water when he shifts the story from book to film? Likely, these 1.5 liter plastic bottles of Evian Water were observed in real time, when the movie was being filmed in Dakar. *Xala* is a visual record of Evian's early entry into the plastic water market. Not only was Evian packaged in plastic in 1975, some Dakarois were drinking it!

Before the arrival of the PET plastic that would take over the global bottled water market in the 1980s, becoming both trend and trouble, there was a limited period where PVC plastic was used as packaging for French mineral water. Plastic mineral water bottles, made with PVC, entered the French market for the first time in late 1968 and as a risk. It was experimental to shift from glass to a brand-new material, PVC plastic, to sell mineral water. At the time, plastic was not yet widely used to store food and beverage for human consumption. Moreover, French mineral water, considered a "therapeutic substance,' was regulated by the French Ministry of Health. Plastic packaging required cultural, marketing, and even legal shifts. Prodded by companies eager to capitalize on this "one-way" packaging model, the French government investigated whether PVC packaging would alter or degrade the qualities of the mineral water inside.[35] In 1968, the Maxi Vittel, a 1.5 L PVC-plastic bottled mineral water, finally hit the French market. Would French consumers accept this new format of PVC plastic

29 Aaron Mushengyezi, "Reimaging Gender and African Tradition?: Ousmane Sembène's Xala Revisited" *Africa Today* 51: 1, 2004.

30 Susannah O'hUadhaigh, '*Evian Backwards': the fetishization of bottled water*. Institute of Art Design and Technology, Dublin, Ireland, 2018.

31 Leo Paul Dana, "Evian Water" British Food Journal, Vol. 102, No. 5-6, (2000) 379.

32 O'hUadhaigh, 2018: 23.

33 Andrea Muehleback, *A Vital Frontier: Water Insurgencies in Europe,* (Duke University Press) 2023: 167.

34 Guy Hawkins, "The Impacts of Bottled Water" *WIRES Water* 4:3 (2017)

35 Nicolas Marty, "The True Revolution of 1968: Mineral Water Trade and the Early Proliferation of Plastic 1960s-1970s" *Business History Review*, 94:3: 495. Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, (Duke University Press) 2021: 2.

for their mineral water? The answer was yes. By the end of the 1970s, this new plastic represented more than 70 percent of all packaging for France's mineral water companies, including Evian. With this history, I suspect that the 1.5 liter plastic Evian bottle featured in *Xala* was made from polyvinyl chloride or PVC.

Although the plastic Evian bottle was deemed safe by the French Ministry of Health, for Rama, the university student in Sembène's film, it is an object of suspicion. Rama was right. PVC plastic, we now know as "one of the most toxic substances for inhabitants of our planet. From cradle to grave, the PVC lifecycle (production, use, and disposal) results in the release of toxic, chlorine-based chemicals, and is one of the world's largest dioxin sources."[36] In 2022, the European Union announced a restriction on the manufacturing, utilization, and sale of PVC.[37]

With our twenty-first century eyes, we can see that the 1.5 Liter bottle on El Hadji's desk will not be safely disposed of. If burnt, it will release an acrid toxic smoke into the air, irritating human lungs and entering the bloodstream. If buried, it will degrade in the ground, contaminating the soil and the water, ending up in the crops, the food, and even mother's breast milk. The plastic he venerates will be with his daughter Rama's children, and grandchildren, and perhaps great grandchildren in some form. However, the matter of disposal is just part of the problem of the Evian bottle.

Today, Senegal is classified by the United Nations as a water-scarce country, despite its network of lagoons, rivers, and estuaries, and its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean. It is also a country where, due to pollution, "a good part of the population prefers bottled water for their consumption."[38] This dynamic is global. From Michigan, USA to Accra, Ghana, to Manila, Philippines, bottled water takes over the market when tap water is not reliable or safe. When this happens, the responsibility to procure safe drinking water shifts from the government to the individual consumer or the business. When water, essential to life, is defined as a private commodity, who manages its safety or affordability? The violence of the Evian bottle is not solely in the plastic chemicals, but in the capture, marketing, and sale of water as a commodity, a trend that is at cross-purposes with water as a life source. And who will be accountable for the waste material that remains?

Dakar's Mbeubeuss Landfill, at over 114 hectares, is one of the largest open-air landfills in the world. It is overflowing with plastic. As Sarah Walker and Elena Giacomelli write, "it is no surprise" that Mbeubeuss is situated in Pikine, one of the poorest suburbs of the city, a place established in 1952 when the colonial government displaced and removed people from central Dakar to make way for French government, French houses, and French agents.[39] The people who French colonial agents removed from the city as pollutants now must also bear the brunt of the plastic waste that rich countries export as pollution. These histories shape the "spatial inequalities inherent in who produces waste and who gets it."[40] Since the 1980s, African countries have used the language of waste colonialism to sound the alarm about high GDP countries that offload their toxic industries and mounds of waste (often plastic) onto African lands and seas. International agreements have not been able to prevent the unethical and/or illegal flow of waste from Europe and North America to Abidjan, Accra, and Dakar.[41] The plastic that litters Dakar's beaches is just the tip of the iceberg, a visual reminder of waste colonialism's mounting consequences, including migration, illness and death.

36 Marcin H. Kudzin, Dominika Powowarska, Natalia Festinger, Jerzy J. Chrusciel, "Risks Associated with the Presence of Polyvinyl Chloride in the Environment and Methods of its Disposal and Utilization," *Materials* 17: 1 (2023).

37 European Environmental Bureau, *PVC Problem Very Clear* (2024) https://rethinkplasticalliance.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/pvc-problem-very-clear.pdf

38 Cheikh Faye, "Water Resources and their management in increasing urban demography: the case of Dakar City in Senegal" in Resources of Water, eds. Prathna Thanjavur Chandrasekaran, IntechOpen, 2022.

39 Walker and Giacomelli, "Waste, Space, and Mobility Justice: interconnecting strands of the climate crisis as experienced in Dakar" *Lo Squaderno/ Explorations in Space and Society* 2021: 10.

40 Ibid.

41 Laura A. Pratt, "*Decreasing Dirty Dumping? A Reevaluation of Toxic Waste Colonialism and the Global Management of Transboundary Hazardous Waste*," 35 William & Mary Environmental Law & Policy Review 581 (2011), https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/wmelpr/vol35/ iss2/5

In *Xala,* the plastic Evian bottle is not only a European novelty but a harbinger of the coming waste flood. By representing this crisis Sembène calls out to new generations of thinkers who understand that there is no liberation that does not include the land.[42] If Africa's illustrious knowledge creators, now as ancestors, are still willing to speak to and collaborate with us, we might a least grapple with these enduring critiques. After watching *Xala* (1975) with the gift of my students' eyes, I return to Ousmane Sembène's other films and interviews. I see water everywhere. In *La Noire de…* (1966), Diouana gazes upon a sprinkler languidly weaving across the lawn of her French boss. In the next scene, a Senegalese woman laboriously lifts a bucket of water to her head from the communal tap. In *Faat Kine* (2000), a brief interlude about the love between mother and child is filmed on the shore of a blindingly beautiful Atlantic Ocean. In Ferid Boughedir's documentary *Caméra d'Afrique* (1983) the sound of the crashing ocean punctuates Ousmane Sembene's interviews.

Returning to Sembène & Sea

"Ousmane Sembène and water– it is an old love story." - Samba Gadjigo (2010)[43]

Water was Sembène's constant companion. "Born on the right bank of the river called Lower Casamance," and raised in a region "cluttered with marsh creeks, locally known as bolongs," water shaped Sembène's sensibility. "He once declared that the early part of his life can be summed up in four words," reports Samba Gadjigo, "'swimming, fishing, tree-climbing, and hunting.'"[44] Gadjigo's 2015 documentary *Sembène!* begins with and returns periodically to a black and white film reel of Senegalese children flipping and jumping in the water. "Palm-trees and coconut trees, marsh creeks overlaid with water lilies, with the half-bent trunk of a Palmyra palm wood that served as a springboard!" reminisces Sembène in his first book, the semi-autobiographical *O Pays, Mon Beau Peuple!*[45] The biographer Gadjigo insists that we should consider Ousmane Sembène's lifelong romance with water to understand all that came after. The revolutionary artist was "a passionate water-lover."

In the film, *Sembène: The Making of African Cinema,* filmmaker Manthia Diawara begins with a walk to Galle Ceddo, the house that Ousmane Sembene built at Yoff, at the edge of the sea.[46] "At Gallé Ceddo, the towering waves of the Atlantic crashing down on the rocks are like so many distant echoes of his childhood in the south, in that native Casamance…"[47] The house itself is a testimony, it speaks in its bricks, its paint, its vistas.

Sembène looks out at the sea while he plans his films. He touches the wooden posts of his patio and says that these form his frame. Instead of a green screen, or white screen, he has the everchanging, roiling Atlantic Ocean as his backdrop. He talks about his childhood riding barges from Dakar to Ziguinchor, the joy of that. He remembers that his father, by his own proclamation, never worked for the white man. He would sell fish to the white man, but never take a job that would require being on the white man's time. This is a meaningful distinction; can one engage in commercial activity and exchange with Europe and Europeans without being on the white man's time? The sea makes it possible, the ocean provides livelihood, sustenance and identity

42 Cajetan Iheka, *African EcoMedia: Network Forms, Planetary Politics (Durham: Duke University) 2021*. Rosalind Fredericks, *Garbage Citizenship: Vital Infrastructures of Labor in Dakar, Senegal* (Durham: Duke University) 2018. Stephanie Newell, *Histories of Dirt: Media and Urban Life in Colonial and Postcolonial Lagos* (Durham: Duke University) 2016. Brenda Chalfin, Waste Works: Vital Politics in Urban Ghana (Durham: Duke University) 2023.

43 Gadjigo, *Ousmane Sembène: The Making of a Militant Artist* (2010): 39.

44 Gadjigo, *Ousmane Sembène: The Making of a Militant Artist* (2010): 5.

45 Gadjigo, 2010:2.

46 Manthia Diawara, Sembène: The Making of African Cinema, 1994.

47 Gadjigo, 2010:18.

apart from the French colonial state and its economic pressures.[48] Samba Gadjigo's biography gives us the filmmaker's life through the land-- the soils, waters, and air-- of Casamance. Here is Sembène beaten by his uncle for swimming in the river, and still he returns to swim again. There is Sembène choosing to fish with his father when he is expelled from school. This is Sembène's determination: I will be a fisherman like my father. The Senegal to which Sembène dedicated his life and directed his voice was not an abstraction. He spoke the language of class and Marx, while reaching for his people, his country– the marshes, rivers, and sea that formed him, fed him, and stretched his body and imagination.

What animates the African revolutionary artist? Sometimes there is a hunger for money or fame; perhaps there is a desire to occupy the seat of power, to make it big in Paris, or New York. It may be all of the above, an ebbing and flowing desire with many feeding tributaries and digressions. For Sembène, there was a love of the land, a "deep seated attachment" to the actual soil, water, and air of the place now called Senegal. The water that shaped Sembène's childhood fueled and renewed his artistic vision throughout his eighty-plus years. Where are our children still springing and diving into the water? If our country's rivers have turned thick and brown because of galamsey gold-mining, if the ocean vistas are marred by plastic waste from shore to wave, if the fish have dwindled in number, can we refuse the white man's work or time? What will we cherish and fight for if our physical environments have been so degraded? In turning again to the artist Ousmane Sembène, he leads us to the mighty sea.

48 Gadijigo, 2010.

Back to Africa

Epistemological Possibilities of Critical African Political Economy

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Abstract

Western social sciences have been plagued by an epistemological narrowness that has limited our understandings of global political economy. Mainstream treatments of political economy rarely elucidate the historical and present-day roles of transnational linkages and coercive forces which produce political and economic realities, particularly in the Global South. I seek to contribute to scholarship which destroys the epistemological borders that prevent the identification of Africa and the rest of the Global South as generative loci of social scientific knowledge and resists their relegation to places where "objective" theories from the Global North are tested. By theorizing global political economy from the perspective of the Continent, it makes visible the long-standing ties between the political economies of the North and South without which capitalism, colonialism, and other modern processes are insufficiently understood. Specifically, the work of Africanists like Samir Amin and Walter Rodney demonstrates not only fruitful critiques of mainstream treatments of African histories and political economies, but also epistemological alternatives to the former, inviting African scholars to undertake decolonial Marxist methodologies that give us robust pictures of our societies and their characteristics. Shifting epistemologies of knowledge to center the continent of Africa gives social scientists a set of contextual and theoretical insights which link seemingly spurious social processes to their historical roots and modern-day articulations, encouraging us to think more effectively about sustainable development, economic democracy, and African dignity.

Keywords: Decolonial Political Economy, Global South, Epistemology, Capitalism and Colonialism

Introduction

The history and ramifications of imperialism and (neo)colonialism in different regions of the world has long been treated by a number of thinkers, whose findings, though greatly varied, converge in their critiques of global capitalism, particularly in its colonial and monopolistic forms (Du Bois,1947; Fanon, 1961; Nkrumah, 1965; Frank, 1966; Amin, 1971; Cardoso, 1972; Rodney, 1972; Oyěwùmí, 1997; Lenin, 1999; Chakrabarty, 2000; Bhambra, 2007; Connell, 2007; Saleh-Hanna, 2008; James, 2012; Go, 2016; Quisumbing-King, 2019; Christian, 2019; Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021). For almost eith decades, these scholars from various fields, namely Accross these works, sociology, history, and economics, etc.set forth overlapping aimes: to trace the conditions of colonization, to mark its shifting phrases, and to interrogate its enduring processes. A central strand of this scholarship links capitalism—arguably modernity's most defining system—to imperialism and colonial domination. From the early dynamics of primitive accumulation, marked by the erosion of the commons and its corollary, the creation of private property, to the concurrent plunder

of Africa, Asia and the Americas, followed by imperialist annexation and the altering of indigenous politico-economic systems, capitalist colonialism emerged as the decisive stage in the process of incorporation of the glob into a singular world system (Lenin, 1999; Du Bois, 1947; Fanon, 1961; Nkrumah, 1965; Frank, 1966; Amin, 1971; Cardoso, 1972; Saleh-Hanna, 2008; James, 2012; Christian, 2019).

The subordination of the regions now called Global South was not only physical; but also ideological and epistemic, disciplining both knowledge and the process of its production. Scholars across disciplines have shown that the epistemic divide between North and South, and the resulting hegemony of knowledge, sustain multiple mechanisms of ideological, political, and economic exploitation between the U.S., Western Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—and, as some argue, Japan and Israel—on the one hand, and countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia on the other (Connell, 1997; 2007; 2014; Galindez, 2023). This manifests in the Global North through the universalization of Euro-Modern theories, understanding fo the world and polices and the subsequent deligitimation of knowledge produced from the perspective of the Global South (Connell, 1997; Oyěwùmí, 1997; Connell, 2007; Go, 2016). Postcolonial geographers are particularly notable in visualizing this epistemic stratification and the ways that the Global South is off the knowledgeable map, and/or relegated to an epistemological hinterland (Brenner and Katsikis, 2020). Roy (2013) underscores this point in urban studies as she argues that the epistemological hegemony of the Global North, limits the discipline's theoretical development. She makes a call to "blast open the theoretical geographies, to produce a new set of concepts in the crucible of a new set of cities" (820). Changing geographies of knowledge, she argues, allows capitalist urbanity to be specifically understood in the contexts of the Global South and provides tools to rethink the phenomena key to urbanism in the modern context. Roy argues that new geographies of knowledge reveal transnational linkages of capitalist processes which the dichotomous language of core and periphery do not explicate in depth. These linkages are central to understanding local contexts and how capitalism is inexplicable at the global level without investigating its treatment of the Global South (Marx and Engels, 1978). This also provides historical context for intentionally overlooked and systematically undertreated phenomena which have their origin in coercive transnational economic processes. I argue that by re-grounding social theory in these geographies—especially through Africanist and Global South perspectives—we can connect seemingly discrete historical phenomena to one another, as well as to the institutions and actors that produced them. This approach yields a form of spatial-epistemic framework that not only brings peripheral processes and phenomena into focus but also generates insights with the potential to improve the material conditions of people of African descent on the continent and beyond. More specifically, reincorporating the work of critical African political economists enriches inriches the ecologies of knowledge within African studies, which, in the last few decades, have focused more on politics and culture Returning to an Africa-centered perspectives, has the potential to provide us with the tools to sharpen our questions and understandings of our societies. Continuing to disengage from these perspectives means that the frustrating status quo in our universities and our societies is maintained. By contrast, continued disengagement reproduces the frustrating status quo in both our universities and our communities thereby leading to the perpetuation of the chasm between the concerns of our peoples and our intellectual and academic interests Disengagement from our own critical political economy leads to maintaining the waning significance of the African academic and ultimately the promotion of a theoretically sparse approach to Black studies, African societies, and development studies–that is, continuing to engage in Freirian verbalism and inaction about the fate of Black peoples. Demonstrating this necessity of this shift, this text asks "what does the political economy of Africa over the last 600 years reveal about global capitalism?"

I explore this central question in four broad sections. The first complicates prevailing notions of universalism and relativism by drawing on Césaire to enrich epistemological approaches to theoretical development and empirical study. Here, I advance an Africa-centered reading of Go (2016): while Africa is a large and diverse

continent with diverse capitalist institutions structuring societies in different ways, there are similarities and trends across our diverse experiences within such a totalizing a system that allow us to share interests in renegotiating our interactions with it.

The second section offers a critical review of mainstream accounts of global and African political economy. I demonstrate that while many of these frameworks provide useful insights, they frequently explain the history and present of the global economy with little or no reference to Africa, or to the non-economic axes of coercion that have profoundly shaped it—even when theoretical and empirical resources are available to do so. Within African political economy itself, I examine scholars who study African economic phenomena uncritically, before turning to critical and Marxist African political economists whose now-marginalized work presents theoretically astute and empirically rich analyses that center African perspectives and African economies. This section traces colonial capitalism and its outcomes, the role of international financial institutions in restructuring African economies and economic thinking, and the consequences of politicized economic policies. It concludes with a sustained engagement with Walter Rodney, highlighting his insistence on the value of studying African societies and economies through a Marxist methodology while also emphasizing, as he himself did in relation to Marx, the need to attend to the specificities of our own time and place.

The third section considers the implications of renewed engagement with critical African political economy for African Studies. I argue that such engagement not only revitalizes the field but also demonstrates to Africans that the continent has always produced research capable of improving the material conditions of our peoples—provided that such knowledge is implemented and innovated upon by actors both inside and outside the academy.

Finally, I conclude with a call for Africanist scholarship to reassess our societies in response to Rodney's enduring challenge, urging scholars to be inventive in crafting a form of Africanist inquiry that substantively engages with critical political economy, and that speaks to the demands of our times, peoples, and places.

It is necessary to restate the fundamental question guiding this text: "what does the political economy of Africa over the last 600 years reveal about global capitalism?" Pursuing this question leads to further considerations of theoretical universalism and relativism. Go (2016) argues that the imperial context of both social thought and sociology in the United States is in fact undertreated by the discipline in spite of the consensus, in the discipline of sociology, that context influences social thought. He further argues that the academic impulse for theoretical universalism is a product of imperialism. Go usefully shows that postcolonial thinkers and revolutionaries throughout the world successfully mastered a practical understanding of Western imperialism as a global phenomenon and its processes as a local peculiarity. In reframing postcolonial theory, long housed primarily within literary traditions, as a resource for sociology, he highlights its capacity to fulfill the discipline's stated imperative of situating thought in context. Postcolonial perspectives, he argues, open new pathways for theoretical production by rejecting universality as a conceptual instrument of European dominance, while still acknowledging that capitalist globalization incorporates every corner of the globe. Bringin Marxist and postcolonial thought Go identifies a shared recognition that representations are always partial, yet still valid within their scope. Citing Kellert et al. (2006), he reminds us that "'All representations are partial…in that any representation must select a limited number of aspects of a phenomenon…This selective and partial character of representations of a phenomenon can be equally correct'" (194). This framework , which he calls postcolonial-perspectival realism, "cannot, in other words, demand universal knowledge in place of the old, but neither can it resort to particularistic knowledge only. If anything, it unsettles the binary between universalism and particularism: all universals are particular. It thus approximates Césaire's notion of the universal, 'a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all'" (196). This approach underscores that relativities and particulars are indispensable for illuminating global processis. It provides a methodology for theorizing transnational processes from "new" locations, drawing on the legacies of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist thinkers from the Global South. Following

their lead we must identify the transnational dynamics that have, for example, consigned nearly forty Global South's countries– with populations totaling almost 1 billion people and endowed abundant natural resources– into the category of "heavily indebted low-income" ("Heavily indebted poor countries," World Bank). These global processes, while structurally connected, manifest differently accross continents, nations, and even regions .

Clarifying the theoretical necessity of balancing the apaarent contradictions between local contexts and global phenomena provides a solid foundation for assessing the uneven ways in which the transnational economic system has been conceptualized. Most mainstream sociological analyses of global capitalism and globalization has aligned with world society theory and, in doing so, have has constantly underplayed the role of coercive transnational processes in capitalist development–processes that have defineed the incorporation of the Global South, and Africa in particular, into the global economic system. Western scholarship on globalization have largely ignored, if not outright abandoned, the insights of prominent scholars that explicitly link imperialism and colonialism to capitalism, such as the sociological interventions of Du Bois (1947) or the dependency theories of Frank (1966) and Cardoso (1972). Instead, many of the most widely cited scholars, namely Immanuel Wallerstein, Joseph Stiglitz, Leslie Sklair, William Robinson, David Harvey, John Meyer, and Liam Swiss have produced influential accounts of the history and manifestations of capitalism, the dynamics of capital accumulation, and the processes of formation of the nation-state and the international politico-economic order. Yet, accross this body of work, colonialism and neocolonialism figure only marginally, if at all, as modalities of economic imperialism. This persistent neglect, visible even in otherwise insightful conceptual developments, underscores the disciplinary disjuncture between theories of global capitalism and the realities of colonial incorporation that continue to shape the Global South.

Further, the limited body of mainstream scholarship in global political economy that engages Africa at all are frequently undermined by ill-defined historiography and lack of context. Ferguson (2006) identifies numerous scholars from various disciplines who either undertreat or outright ignore Africa in their analyses of political economy. A telling example appears in the used anthology *Political Economy of Africa* (2010. Its opening chapters, intendid to provide a historical foundation for assessing Africa's economic performance since independence and related social indicators like health, education, fall into the same shortcomings. Chapters 2 and 3, authored by Peter Lawrence and Bill Freund, purport to establishthe same improvident tendencies: underdeveloped historiography, superficial engagment with context, and a failure to situate African economies within the broader dynamics of colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism .

Lawrence and Freund both emphasize the contrast between Africa's initial period of economic growth in the 1960s and early '70s and the subsequent contraction that followed. They argue that the optimism of political decolonization quickly gave way to stagnation, with recovery only beginning in the early 2000s before being disrupted again by the 2008–10 global financial crisis, itself a product of speculative excess in U.S. markets. For both, Africa's economic integration into the world economy has been defined primarily by two factors: reliance on the export of primary products—a sector marked by steeply declining prices and reduced output—and increasing dependence on imports of cheap consumer goods and foodstuffs. These dynamics are taken as central indicators of the continent's persistently low economic output.

In addition, both exploreauthors explore patterns of international investment patterns that, in their view, reflect low levels of capitalist economic activity on the African continent. They argue that Africa is often cast as a "risky" investment environment due to "political instability" and "lack of good governance"—phrases that echo UN discourse and largely reflect the interests of Western powers (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005). Where investment does occur, it typically takes the form of national public–foreign private partnerships, with foreign capital providing the overwhelming share of funds. This structure reinforces, rather than disrupts, the observations long made by Frantz Fanon, Samir Amin, and other African-centered social scientists: that domestic elites within the public sector often collaborate with foreign capital to secure access to raw materials,

cheap labor, and protected markets. While acknowledging the presence of some indigenous capitalists, both authors conclude that their numbers remain too small to form a "productive" national bourgeoisie capable of driving autonomous national development rather than serving international markets. Moreover, neither foreign nor domestic capitalists show significant investment in education or technical training—investments that might otherwise strengthen existing production systems and open pathways to industrialization.

The problems with this perspective are numerous Chief among them, as noted, is the persistent failure to address continuities from colonialism. A review of the rest of the *Political Economy of Africa* volume confirms that most contributors neglect to integrate a sustained analysis of linkages from the colonial period to the present, thereby producing a decontextualized account of African economies. Lawrence and Freund do not grapple with the ongoing coercion exerted by former and current hegemons in shaping elections, economic policies, and broader trajectories of African states For instance, the establishment of U.S. Africa Command in 2003 inaugurated relatively unprecedented levels of well-funded U.S. military activity on the continent—yet these developments receive no mention. This omission is especially glaring given that military occupation has long been a central mechanism of Western political and economic domination, both before and during the colonial era .

In addition to the persistent failure to address continuities from colonialism and their failure to to tackle new developments in political economy, Lawrence and Freud display a certain level of complacency with colonial-capitalist modes of production which Wallerstein and Gutkind's (1976) similarly titled anthology did not. The uptake of UN terminology and the short neoliberal memory is frustrating at best. Lawrence in particular discusses the health and life expectancy in many African countries just after political independence and makes no mention of the obvious: the metropoles responsible for "administering" colonial territories degraded health and healing to that which was necessary for labor and acceptable by Christian churches. Without historical context, poor conditions in African countries seem to be endogenous when they are the result of concerted and targeted policy and action.

Further, there is a deployment of a determinism which Seamster and Ray (2018) would note is endemic to Western epistemes. For example, both Lawrence and Freund talk about needing a larger proletariat to develop before Africa can be economically active in a way that is on par with its size and population. Is this realistic and even necessary given the different ways that dependency theorists and their Afro-descended counterparts, like Fanon (1961), Rodney (1972), Magubane (1976) and others observe the varying levels of integration into the what Magubane calls the colonial-capitalist mode of production (CCMP)? In expanding on the central question of this text, should African development follow the same process of that of (Western) Europe or the white settler colonies, which have produced hazards to human and nonhuman life? Pragmatically, the development of a large proletariat throughout Africa means the existing widespread plantation/latifundia-style primary production left in place by colonizing countries cannot produce cheap raw materials, which is what most African economies are based on. These features of underdevelopment and the investment in them by foreign capitalists and institutions are not named in these pieces. In fact, there is only a brief mention of the different ways capitalism develops in different places in both pieces.

To be sure, there are scholars of political economy who have adopted more critical approaches, many drawing on world- systems frameworks and similar theoretical approaches. And yet, despite his prior work as an Africanist, Wallerstein (2006) still presents the international order through the categories of core, periphery and semi-periphery without reckoning with the way primitive accumulation was as much a global phenomenon as a national one–a point emphasized , thirty to thirty-five years earlier by Lenin, Du Bois, Frank, and Cardoso. Recognizing that primitive accumulation was imposed on much of the African continent is vital, for it contextualizes the structural disarray inherited by postcolonial states (Du Bois, 1947). Similarly, William Robinson's notion of the Transnational Capitalist Class (TCC), which he traces to the neoliberal restructuring

of the 1970s, illuminates new dynamics of global power. Yet even Robinson's framework would benefit from deeper engagement with the historical legacies of coercion, dispossession, and uneven accumulation across the Global South—legacies that assume particularly distinctive forms in Africa.

In contrast to mainstream perspectives, undertreated texts from critical African and Africanist scholars highlight key themes in African political economy that provide a more historically, theoretically, and empirically grounded understanding of global political economy. These themes include the colonial capitalist mode of production (CCMP), including its logics, mechanisms, and outcomes, as well as suggestions for paths forward, which include a renewed application of a decolonial Marxism, and applying it toward a program for studying African nations with the goal of disentanglement from the CCMP and extrication from the system's logics. One of the most incisive articulations of this frameworks comes from South African sociologist Bernard Magubane, who coined the phrase colonial-capitalist mode of production (CCMP) to capture the particular dynamics of AFrica's incorporation into global capitalism. = *ent*

In his 1976 work, Magubane offers a succinct and broad history of the CCMP, beginning with evolution of class structure on the continent. Against the Africansists who have dismissed class as an inappropriate conceptual tool, Mugabe insists that it remains relevant for analyzing African political economies. He grounds his analysis in the diversity of precolonial African social formations: from relatively egalitarian communities in which divisions of labor had not yet hardened into lasting inequality, to more complex states with infrastructures of reciprocity but also material inequality. Magubane shows that these varied societies were incorporated into the CCMP to different degrees, yet all were ultimately subordinated to it. The CCMP, he argues, entailed the redirection of African economies by European demand. First, through the slave trade, millions of Africans were violently removed from their polities, devastating demographic and social structures. Later, during colonial rule, vast numbers were coerced into cities and economic enclaves to labor in extractive industries under dangerous and often fatal conditions, with little or no compensation—conditions justified by labeling them "temporary workers." This internal drain on Africa's population continues today (Ferguson, 2015).

Meanwhile, those who remained within local communities faced another form of dispossession: the flooding of their economies with cheap and low-quality foreign imports, undermining indigenous production. In both cases, the CCMP created persistent scarcity and dependency across the continent. Scholars including Rodney (1972; 2022) and Magubane (1979) have traced how European intervention over the last six centuries directly and indirectly destroyed African economies.

Magubane concludes that that the different degrees of incorporation into the CCMP have produced arrested development of precapitalist economic relations and a hybridization of the economic identities of the vast majority of African people given the incompletion of proletarianization. These two phenomena have led to widespread impoverishment. To make matters worse, there is a level of misdirection which the CCMP is able to capitalize on: Africans may think that since precolonial economic relations are still extant, they are the chief source of their lack, when in fact the CCMP more broadly now shapes economic relations even where capitalist development appears to be absent. Building on this point, it is important to recognize that the manifestations of the CCMP operate according to specific logics and discursive structures, which are often foregrounded despite economic analysis sometimes revealing contradictory realities.

For example, Amin (2014) and Fine (2010) address the conservative, complacent, and anti-Black nature of formal economics training. Prolific scholar of political economy and African history Samir Amin argues that economics training woefully and intentionally underprepares its students around the world to deal with the economic realities of the real world, including recurrent capitalist economic crises, class struggle, economic alienation, the role of the state and its actors, and related and unrelated contradictions of capitalism because of its liberal perspective. He applies this analysis to the political economy of Africa in the modern period, arguing that there are a number of factors not accounted for by mainstream liberal capitalism which have kept

the countries on the continent in a position where their economies are extraverted and thus unable to provide for needs at the national level. Much to the continent's detriment, Amin observes, African economists often reproduce this model by training their own students in the logics of the Bretton Woods institutions such as the World Bank and IMF. These institutions have long promotoed shallow and inadequate economic prescriptions in the wake of coercive indebtedness across the Global South (Fine, 2010; Babb, 2015). As opposed to this tradition, Amin underscores the continued usefulness of Marxism as it allows for an empirical understanding of accumulation, production and surplus value at the national and international levels, not only for the Global North but also, and in distinct ways the Global South, and in his case, the African continent.

First, Amin distinguishes between the capitalism which the bourgeois economist academics teach about and "really-existing" capitalism. Liberal economics presents what Amin calls "imaginary capitalism," consisting only of the self-regulating market and its "natural" laws. Really-existing capitalism and thus, economics per se, is determined by forces beyond the market, namely the socio-economic relations of a society (i.e. the relationships between those who produce, those who own the means of production, and other classes of people involved in the physical and ideological production process). Indeed, no capitalist market exists without market designers, narrative-based rationalizations through advertising and media, and government involvement, from sales tax rates to corporate tax cuts and exemptions. In spite of these essential interventions in a supposedly self-regulating system, capitalism experiences recurrent crises. Amin writes that because of this, any equilibrium mainstream economists describe often refers to avoiding or deferring crises of stagnation and devaluation. In order to avoid this, the state, representing the interests of capital and its expansion as a whole, intervenes and helps to stabilize crises.

Somewhat ironically,they myopa of liberal economics'–its insistence on viewing only the market while ignoring the broader forces that shape it–is coupled with a propensity to overreach. Amin joins a wide range of scholars in critiquing the tendency to attribute liberal economic concepts, such as cost-benefit analyses, to an alleged human nature rather than to the Enlightenment rationality that provided the intellectual backdrop for the rise of capitalism. Within mainstream liberal economics, capitalism and its laws are often treated as "transhistorical" (16-17) or even as "quasi-supernatural" (18). By contrast, Amin contends that one of the strengths of Marxist analysis is that it situates capitalism in its context: Marxism reminds us that capitalism and its "laws" are in fact products of time and history.

Amin further argues that capitalist expansion and development are distinct, though often conflated. Capitalist expansion can be qualified by increases or reductions in employment rates or wages, whereas development is rarely defined with precision, and its benchmarks often appear incidental to capitalist growth The true aim of capitalism is not development, but rather the subordination of production forces to that which allows for capital accumulation. Therefore, Amin argues, we must deal with really-existing capitalism, where class struggle, recurrent crises, the state, and the reality of varying levels of development at the global level (however ill-defined) are part and parcel of the function of capitalism rather than aberrations or misapplication of bourgeois economic prescriptions.

From this vantage point, analyzing Africa and the global economic system from the perspective of really-existing capitalism means that we identify the extraverted nature of African economies as a serious problem contributing to poor economic and social outcomes. To illustrate this, Amin identifies four components of an economy: exports, mass consumption, luxury consumption and production goods. He notes that what he calls autocentric economies, mostly those of North America, Western Europe and Japan focus their energies, directly and indirectly, on items for mass consumption, like agricultural products, and production goods, like household items, clothing, etc. By contrast, the economies of most of Latin America, Africa and Asia are focused on exports to the Global North and luxury consumption for the national bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. Their economies are prevented from attending to the needs of African people because wages are seen exclusively as costs to be reduced, not investments in the national economy. Amin notes that even

the profits from exports, the center of extraverted economies, are altogether low and mostly reexported to the Global North. This extraverted economic orientation is supported by one of the key dynamics of the CCMP in siphoning labor from rural areas into mining, urban and other economic enclaves for temporary work. Another factor is the current lack of technicians and specialists, due not only to legacies of inaccessible colonial education, but also to reductions in public spending on education and employment development since the dawn of neoliberalism in the postcolony; as mentioned before, such atrophy of public spending on social goods was a hallmark of the IMF and World Bank's structural adjustment programs. This lack of resources led to emigration by significant portions of Africa's population to the Global North.

Similarly, Fine (2010) conducts a deep analysis on the history of development economics both within the academy and in the African policy world. Fine agrees with Babb (2015) regarding Bretton Woods institutions' creation of their own expert perspectives via selection of marginal academics who shared their views on neoliberalism, which continued to create feedback loops into economics training. Their specific contextualization of African interactions with IFIs provides a thorough investigation of World Bank literature on the reasons for poor African economic performance in capitalist terms. He argues that IFI literature is rife with shallow analyses with inconsistent benchmarks, all the while maintaining that structural adjustment policies were simply implemented poorly. Neoliberalism is maintained as the only path forward, though it has led to unimpressive growth, particularly in the case of the African continent. Boyce and Ndikumana (2001) discuss an example of the alarmingly unscientific approach economists and other scholars take in relation to the African continent. The authors argue that an improper and sporadic tabulation of the national accounts of 25 sub-Saharan African countries has resulted in inaccurately labelling as SILICs (severely indebted and low-income countries) by the World Bank. They argue that while the governments themselves may be severely indebted (for a myriad of reasons out of the scope of the article), the countries, i.e. the combination of the government and its citizens, are not. They substantiate this claim by describing and tabulating **capital flight**, which they define as the "difference between capital inflows [including debt] and foreign exchange outflows [i.e., capital outflows that cause a nation's currency to depreciate]" (35).

Essentially, capital flight is the re-exporting of capital and assets generated or guaranteed by the public funds or public borrowing of a nation. Instead of assets and any dividends earned being saved, invested or spent in the country which generated them, they are held or spent abroad. In the case of much of the 25 sub-Saharan African countries the authors include in their sample, debt and capital flight are closely related. As the authors and other scholars note, sub-Saharan governments are encouraged and at times even coerced into borrowing from external creditors, with tax revenue being the only source they rely upon for repayment and thus burdening the African taxpayer. However, many regimes have been allowed to and even supported in their misrepresentation of trade revenues, which should another source of national income. Instead, under and overreporting of the national accounts deficits allows the political and economic elite of these nations to hide assets abroad or reduce or eliminate their import/export/corporate tax liability. In fact, the authors tabulate total capital flight from the 25 SILICs in their sample to be $193-$285 billion in 1996 USD from 1970 to 1996, with the second figure denoting a calculation which includes stocks and their dividends. However, the combined external debt of these countries only amounted to $178 billion in 1996. This discrepancy leads to three important points about how capital flight is coercively generated and by whom. First, the political and economic elite in many sub-Saharan African countries are the holders of the majority of this wealth, though they did not generate it. Second, the supposed external creditors of African debt have a vested interest in the debt servicing industry. Third, the international debt servicing process negatively affects sub-Saharan African nations in particular. The outsized nature of national debt and capital flight are not felt as sharply in Latin America, the region which is closest to African in terms of occurrence of both phenomena.

The authors' propose useful resolutions that place the burden of proving the validity of debt incurred by the governments of these 25 sub-Saharan African nations on demonstrating its connection to public investment rather than private assets. If the debt is traced to the latter, responsibility should fall square on the private individuals who used public debt for private gain and not on African citizens and taxpayers who are burdened by the use of public funds on debt servicing. This article serves as a clear example of linked capitalist processes (of national indebtedness and capital flight) with international direction which position sub-Saharan Africa as a region which is intentionally underdeveloped as part and parcel of the capitalist world system. Sub-Saharan Africa is not the periphery by nature; rather, capitalist processes and their agents work in a distinct pattern that "peripheralizes" sub-Saharan Africa.

Building on this critique, I turn on Walter Rodney as a clear example of how Decolonial Marxism can expand and deepen mainstream African political economy. The rich, thorough, and diverse scholarship of Africanist political economists demonstrates that capitalist ideologies and policies have been consummately harmful for the Continent. At the same time, similar scholarship has proffered methodologies by which Africans can restructure our economies in democratic rather than oligarchic configurations. In a series of essays originally published in 1975, Walter Rodney (2022) applies his spectacular analysis to a number of topics including Marxism, the components of African underdevelopment, and decolonization. Most importantly, Rodney lays out a program for Decolonial or Third World Marxism, arguing that the historical materialist methodology and method have an enduring relevance to accurate analysis of the situation of the Global South, and more specifically, the global experiences of Black people .

Rodney begins by emphasizing that Marxism is a methodology and, as such, it is transferrable to various contexts with the possibilities for different results. Rodney addresses the common error of conflating Marx's methodology and method, which is simply looking at a society's relationship to the production of that which they need to survive, and his conclusions about Western Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. He argues that so many adaptations of Marxism by peoples of the Global South speaks to the relevance of Marxist critique of capitalism to a variety of contexts. Millions of people from the Global South have appreciated Marxism because it highlights the ways in which capitalism bereaves the common person in any society which implements it. While the global conservative shift since the late 1970s has compromised many implementations of Marxist methods of economic organization, their impact on the world is still relevant. The adoption of Marxist ideology in the Global South is emblematic of the discontent of people with the status quo; it fills a void bourgeois ideology and methodology cannot.

One of Rodney's key arguments about the usefulness of Marxism is that it resists the artificial bifurcation of the natural world and the social world. Paired with Amin (2014), we see how bourgeois economics not only separates the study of society from that of the natural sciences but also stretches its "laws" into the natural world. This division has contributed to the marginalization of social sciences (with the exception of economics), producing a limited understanding of capitalism's global operations and an amnesia about non-transactional, non-capitalist forms of economic agency. It has also led to an impoverished grasp of Marxism's applicability. Rodney insists that Marxism in the Global South is necessarily distinct from classical Marxism because the objective conditions– colonial histories, structural position in the global economic system, and the legacies of racial capitalism– are fundamentally different. Therefore, a decolonial engagement with Marxism requires that the researcher or activist deeply understand their society through a historical materialist methodology, rather than simply reproducing structures that existed elsewhere. In the same vein as in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), Rodney diverges from Marx by showing that the first stage of capitalism, primitive accumulation, was a European phenomenon later imposed upon Africa. It was not an indigenous African process.He further challenges Marx's characterization of slavery as an obsolete mode of production superseded entirely by wage labor, instead demonstrating the centrality of African slavery to the development of global capitalism.

In this way, Rodney exemplifies the task of the Marxist in the Global South: applying historical materialism concretely to African contexts. He acknowledges the difficulty of this endeavor, given the weight of colonial legacies and global economic structures, but insists that it is essential if we wish to disentangle ourselves from the Capitalist Center–Periphery Model (CCPM). The strength of his argument lies in conceiving Marxism not as a fixed set of conclusions but as a flexible methodology for critically analyzing society. For Africanists, this means that the implementation of Marxist—or Rodneyist—methodology must remain both empirically grounded and contextually adaptive.

Application of a Rodneyist perspective (i.e. a decolonial Marxist methodology) is critical for African Studies because we have the opportunity to go further than we ever have as we review our politico-economic contexts with fresh eyes. Adopting such a perspective means that we as academics rediscover our ability to understand our societies from our own perspectives, because they are full of insight and depth relevant to Africans and others. We also have the ability to forge a unique intellectual and practical path which opposes the academic pattern in the Global North, which often turns ideology and methodology turn into dogma. This also requires us to conceive of innovative and familiar ways to solve social problems. Furthermore, this perspective requires us to assess ourselves as intellectuals and academics, critically assessing where we have fallen prey to Fanon's conception of the Western sentinel in the minds of colonized peoples (Fanon, 1961). We must also realize that this Western sentinel has been amplified by the particular conservatism of neoliberal capitalism, justifying austerity and lack. In sum, repositioning our epistemological map and going back to our own continent as Africans means meaningful engagement with critical political economy and engaging with it as agents, and empowering our peoples to do the same. Democratizing knowledge and innovation in the ways in which scholars like Du Bois, Magubane, Amin, Rodney, and others advocate for is the base upon which African economic agency can be meaningfully built.

Conclusion

Critical assessment of dominant theories of globalization are necessary in our changing world. The undertreatment of Africa and other areas in the Global South continues to be an improper approach to understanding globalization because Europe and white settler colonies are not reflective of the rest of the world. By exploring the theoretical perspectives from the Global South and Africa in particular, we able to better understand global history, capitalism and globalization, and other social phenomena. We may even find that those theories are generative and reveal insights about capitalist processes in the Global North, for which we have a gravely incomplete picture. Instead of situating the global economic order in its global historical contexts, we get a reduced picture of the process, delinked from its historical prefigurations. Imperialism and colonialism are not throw-away politico-economic formations lost in history; they are long-term projects of extraction and exploitation with present-day manifestations. Through colonial law and economic policy, European nations and white settler colonies have manufactured dispossession, extraction, and underdevelopment which impacts the way Africans meet our everyday needs. Furthermore, centering Africa in our analysis enables us to see the colonial capitalist mode of production (CCMP) as a longitudinal set of structures originating in Western Europe and conditioning the lives of African-descended people around the world in distinct and similar ways. We see that capitalism was and is a generative force for primitive accumulation in international contexts. We also see that many societal structures in the Global South heavily depend on colonial ones, often involving the same colonizing/neocolonialist powers with similarly updated, but not altogether different, logics and rationalizations. While we have seen that forms of extra-economic coercion like militarism and economic coercion like the policies of the World Bank and IMF both continue to expand imperialist states. Applying the perspectives of critical African political economy to globalization and other capitalist processes of retrenchment yields rich epistemological and theoretical insights which, if taken up, help reveal the obfuscated linkages

between the Global South and the Global North. Imperialism, colonialism, and other forms of coercion are keys to understanding capitalism in sum; to continue to ignore this means we accept half-truths, framing the history and impacts of a world-altering global process through the concerns of the few.

The implications of going back to Africa are not simply broader epistemological lessons about historical linkages across space and time; we also come to understand a methodology for action. The example of Rodney's decolonial Marxism is one powerful theoretical framework and methodology arising out of the knowledge of Africa and its diasporas. It is an approach to political economy which examines the rich history of the second largest continent. By applying the methodology of decolonial Marxism, we collapse the artificial boundary between science and nature, realizing that sciences which have been harmful to Africans like economics are themselves products of history, and therefore subject to human intervention.

Thus, to theorize from Africa means that African scholars generate theories which expose covert forms of colonial capitalist ideology, form and process that have been deemed natural, necessary, or even African, and that understanding the maintenance of this present way of organizing the economy will continue to be harmful to Africans. Not only do our diagnostic tools become sharper when theorizing from Africa, our actionable toolbox expands as well and we begin to see that African agency, self-determination, and economic democracy is possible. We move from narrower empirical arguments which reinforce elitism and the sidelining of the African intellectual on the Continent to embracing normative calls to action that compel us to act alongside our peoples. The latter has become taboo in academic spaces in the global North, even as it descends again into open fascism alongside economic underperformance and constructed austerity. In order to speak to the overt and covert ways capitalist ideologies, forms and economic organization as a whole have failed to live up to its promises for Africans, we must go back to centering Africa. In doing so, we undertake Rodneyist methods to effectively contribute to an intellectual tradition that speaks more substantively to the lived realities of our peoples and come alongside them as we seek to transform our societies into those were well-being is the means and the end.

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Kenyan Children and youth as Keepers of Indigenous Knowledge[1]

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Abstract

This study focused on intergenerational transmission of herbal knowledge where 38 young participants learned and documented different medicinal plants and herbs in their community as taught by their elders. The study investigated how documenting and embodying of African knowledge enable youth to imagine futures otherwise and what it means for African futures that knowledge is passed intergenerationally through indigenous languages and ways. This project contributes to a decolonial future of Africa by giving agency to the youth in preserving herbal knowledge, ensuring community regeneration, preserving ecological knowledge, and promoting linguistic sovereignty.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge, Intergenerational Learning, Herbal Medicine, Youth Empowerment, Linguistics and Cultural Revitalization

Introduction

Africa possesses not only a young demographic profile but also ecologies rich in organic compounds that sustain diverse medicinal flora. These plants synthesize bioactive secondary metabolites with therapeutic potential—including glycosides, alkaloids, phenolic compounds, flavonoids, phloroglucinols, saponins, and sterols (Mwavita, 2025)[2]. While conducting the research that culminated in my book, *Indigenous Languages and Indigenous Knowledge in East Africa: Swahili, Kikuyu and Kamba*, I observed firsthand the wide range of illnesses treated by local medicinal herbs and plants. Elders also reported that many species are disappearing—driven by population growth, drought, and limited community awareness of their value. Compounding this loss, knowledge holders, particularly herbalists, do not consistently transmit their expertise to the wider community, placing this corpus of local knowledge at risk. To counter this, my ongoing project in Kenya engages children in learning and documenting the medicinal uses of herbs and plants as narrated by their parents, grandparents, and other elders, so that they grow up understanding the value and applications of indigenous flora. The project also targets youth who have completed 12th grade and are awaiting admission to colleges and universities; like the primary school children, they are recording different herbs and their uses directly from elders.

1 This paper was presented at the South East African Languages and Literature Forum (SEALLF) Conference on Sept. 27-28, 2024 at the University of Georgia, Athens and at the Howard University African Indigenous Knowledge and African Languages Conference on Feb. 21-22, 2025.

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Building on these observations, before children and youth began the project, we conducted training sessions with them and their teachers on the project's purpose and on clear protocols for identifying, collecting, and documenting medicinal plants and herbs. This initiative is not merely a record-keeping exercise; it is an intergenerational undertaking that braids Africa's past, present, and future. It treats elders and the young as custodians of indigenous knowledge and languages, and empowers older generations, youth, and children by engaging them in research, environmental stewardship, and the appreciation of African cultures, peoples, and places. Aligned with Agenda 2063 of the African Union—Aspiration 7, Goal 7, which calls for "environmentally sustainable, climate-resilient economies and communities … to sustainably manage the continent's rich biodiversity, forests, land and waters" through adaptive measures—this work insists that no segment of the population can be left out.

Background of the Study:

Why involve young children and youth in this project? While researching my book, *Indigenous Languages and Indigenous Knowledge in East Africa: Swahili, Kikuyu and Kamba*, I lost sleep after elders and community members told me that knowledge of medicinal plants and herbs was no longer being passed to the young as in the past. The shift is structural: children and adolescents spend most of their time in school—often in boarding schools—and have limited contact with elders. This realization prompted the project **"**Children and Youth as Custodians of Indigenous Knowledge**."**

I imagined a return to the intergenerational pedagogy as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) recalls: children listening to stories after a day's work and retelling them to peers while playing or working in the fields. In that spirit, I pictured an elder calling children over, pointing out a plant, naming it, and explaining its uses. My own childhood in Kenya confirms the value of this embodied literacy. When my ear ached, I knew to fetch mutĩ (*Asipilia pluriseta*) and put drops in the ear. A cut from play sent me to kĩluma (*Aloe vera*) to apply its sap. Recurrent duodenal ulcers were soothed by mũthangila (*Barleria eranthemodes*) burned to ash and licked, and I watched others drink lũta (*Sesamum calycimum*) for the same ailment. These are the kinds of situated knowledges I do not want any African child to miss—whether in East, West, North, Southern, or Central Africa.

Accordingly, for four weeks—especially evenings and weekends—children and youth walked with elders through homes, neighborhoods, and communal spaces to learn, identify, and name local herbs and plants. They documented in writing and memorized the medicinal uses conveyed by parents, grandparents, and other elders. In doing so, they reactivated an intergenerational circuit of knowledge that schooling schedules had inadvertently disrupted.

This project is about empowering the youth and children to take part in the society as custodians of herbal medicine, African languages, and the environment for their own benefit and for their future generations. It is also a project, which gazes into the future and the past especially before the onset of colonialism. To secure the future of herbal medicine and African languages, we must equip younger generations to recognize their relevance and their mutual interdependence. This project contests the assumption that indigenous knowledge—herbal knowledge included—should be the preserve of elders alone, and it counters myths that equate the use of herbs with backwardness or witchcraft. By providing early, structured training in the health benefits of medicinal plants, we cultivate respect and practice; in time, some participants will become specialists and researchers who sustain and expand the field. The project also interrogates Africa's reliance on external support for health and curricula—what Moyo (2009) calls "dead aid"—by building homegrown expertise and knowledge systems.

A Brief Literature Review

Although several studies have catalogued medicinal plants in Kenya and across Africa, there is a marked dearth of research that engages children and youth in the learning, collection, and documentation of herbal medicine. As Lisanza and Ndungo (2024) show, herbal medicine has deep historical roots among the Kamba of eastern Kenya: local pharmacopoeias reflect close knowledge of the environment, and Kamba traders exchanged medicinal plants, herbs, and honey within the ancient Indian Ocean trade (Lisanza & Ndungo, 2024). Building on this record while addressing the participatory gap, the present study positions children and youth as active custodians and documentarians of indigenous pharmacological knowledge.

Lisanza and Ndungo (2024) document some of the different medicinal plants and herbs found among the Kamba, Kikuyu, and Swahili in East Africa. Their work is particularly important as it catalogues some of the medicinal plants and herbs found in the three communities. Our project, however, is different from Lisanza and Ndungo's as it involves pupils in primary schools and high school graduates in identifying, learning, and documenting medicinal plants and herbs in their communities. Conceived as a practicum, the project pairs younger community members with adults to safeguard both knowledge and environment, positioning youth at the center of custodianship—and, in so doing, allowing them to shape the future of this critical domain.

A second strand of the literature consists of regional and continental catalogues of medicinal flora. Wanjala et al. (2016) document species across eastern Kenya, while Iwu (2014) surveys African pharmacognosy more broadly. These works provide indispensable baselines—taxonomic lists, vernacular names, and reported uses—but, like Lisanza and Ndungo (2024), they do not enlist children or youth as co-researchers, nor do they mobilize intergenerational participation in situ.

The present study departs methodologically. Rather than extracting information from a limited set of informants, it engages the entire community—pairing elders with primary-school pupils and recent secondary-school graduates—to learn, identify, and document local medicinal plants. This intergenerational, community-embedded design transforms documentation into practice, knowledge transmission, and stewardship, addressing the participatory gap left by Wanjala et al. and Iwu.

A third corpus extends the cataloguing impulse. Maundu and Tengnäs (2005) document medicinal plants across forty-four Kenyan communities, and Jefwa et al. (2019) survey species within the Kaya Kauma Sacred Forest in Kilifi County. Valuable as these inventories are, neither study involves children or youth as co-researchers in the documentation process.

Taken together, the literature leaves a clear gap. To the best of our knowledge, no prior study in Kenya (or the region) systematically recruits primary-school pupils and recent secondary-school leavers to learn, identify, and document medicinal plants in partnership with elders; nor do existing catalogues explicitly tether pharmacobotanical documentation to language transmission and environmental stewardship in a future-oriented, intergenerational design. The present project addresses this gap by positioning young people at the center of community-based research, entrusting them with the custodianship of herbal knowledge and African languages as a pathway to safeguarding both cultural memory and the environment.

Methodology

This ongoing project reports preliminary findings from a four-week field phase conducted in July 2024 in one primary school and its surrounding community in Machakos District, Eastern Province, Kenya (see Figure 1). The community is predominantly Kamba; Kikamba and Kiswahili are the main languages of daily life.

A total of 38 participants took part:

- 14 out-of-school youth who had just completed secondary school and were awaiting admission to universities or middle-level colleges (e.g., teacher training, nursing).
- 24 Grade-5 pupils enrolled at the focal primary school.

Over the four weeks, participants identified, learned, and documented medicinal plants and herbs found in their homes, villages, and broader community. The youth and pupils conducted interviews with parents, grandparents, and other community elders to elicit plant names, therapeutic uses, and the parts of the plant used for treatment.

All participants were expected to record and learn the names of plants/herbs in three languages—Kikamba, Kiswahili, and English (where available). Descriptions of uses and plant parts were likewise recorded trilingually. This multilingual protocol was designed to promote multilingualism and multiliteracies as core community resources (see Lisanza & Ndungo, 2024) and to challenge colonial monolingual ideologies of "one language, one nation," which do not reflect Africa's linguistic realities. Embracing multilingualism aligns the project's documentation practices with the continent's everyday communicative ecology.

Theoretical Framework: Sociocultural Theory and Anti-colonial Framework

This study is anchored in two complementary frameworks—sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and an anticolonial framework (Dei, 2012)—which together justify the project's intergenerational, community-embedded, and multilingual design.

From a sociocultural perspective, higher psychological processes (including oral and written language) first emerge on the interpsychological plane—between people—before becoming intrapsychological—within the individual (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning is mediated through language and other cultural tools and is accelerated

through guided participation within a zone of proximal development. In our context, repeated participation by children and youth in identifying, naming, and documenting medicinal plants—alongside more knowledgeable others (parents, grandparents, herbalists, and other elders)—has the potential to transform communal practices into individual competencies. Put simply, expertise in local pharmacobotany is cultivated through sustained, scaffolded interaction; adults in African communities thus play a constitutive role in transmitting herbal knowledge to the next generation.

The anticolonial framework centers African peoples, their knowledge systems, and their languages as primary sites of authority (Dei, 2012). It treats indigenous pharmacologies as worthy of rigorous study and documentation and calls for the empowerment of African languages as vehicles of scientific and cultural knowledge. This orientation assigns agency to children and youth as co-creators and custodians of knowledge, while affirming elders' responsibility to transmit generously across generations. It resonates with Ubuntu—"a source of inspiration for our future in Africa… we should aim at inclusivity… promote sharing and the interests of the collective, as well as individuals within the collective" (Tamale, 2023)—and with the injunction that "Africa needs to pursue becoming its own center, and putting people to work" (Mbembe, in Blaser, 2013). Operationally, our project decolonizes research practice by enrolling young people as researchers, not merely respondents, thereby contesting inherited hierarchies over who may produce and hold indigenous knowledge. As Ndlovu (2020) argues, "decolonization encapsulates potentialities and possibilities of creating another world… the decolonization of the 21st century needs to change the structure itself," including the structure of knowledge custodianship. It also affirms epistemic dignity: "human beings are born to valid and legitimate knowledge" (Ndlovu, 2020). In this light, demystifying herbal medicine—distinguishing it from pejorative associations with "witchcraft"—is crucial to the decolonization of young African minds (Thiong'o, 1986) and to the linguistic sovereignty that sustains those knowledges.

Taken together, these frameworks mandate an intergenerational, community-owned, and multilingual methodology. They justify pairing elders with children and youth; recording names, parts, and uses of plants in Kikamba, Kiswahili, and English; and shifting custodianship from an elders-only model to a shared guardianship in which the young are trained early to carry forward communal resources. As the Kamba proverb reminds us, mũtĩ ũkonzawa wĩ mwĩũ—*you bend a tree when it is young*. The project therefore confronts "the psychological and mental wars that deny Africans the understanding of their resources" (Mwavita, 2025) by cultivating confident, locally grounded researchers from childhood onward. In sum, the sociocultural and anticolonial lenses work in tandem to valorize African indigenous knowledge systems and to organize practices that ensure their continuity.

Research Questions

Guided by the sociocultural and anticolonial frameworks outlined above, this study is driven by two questions:

1. How does the process of documenting and embodying (i.e., learning, practicing, and using) indigenous herbal knowledge enable children and youth to envision—and begin to enact—African futures otherwise?

2. What are the implications for African futures when knowledge is transmitted intergenerationally in and through indigenous languages and epistemic practices?

Preliminary Findings

Over the four-week field phase, participants identified, learned, and documented **91 distinct medicinal herbs and plants**, linking them to **48 illnesses and conditions**. For each entry, youth recorded (where available) the **trilingual nomenclature** (Kikamba, Kiswahili, English), the **plant part(s) used**, and the **mode of preparation and administration** as conveyed by elders. Reported therapeutic uses span major domains of community health—including gastrointestinal, dermatological, respiratory, and reproductive indications, among others. **Table 1** presents a sample of the documented taxa and their recorded uses.

Table 1: Herbs and Diseases (by author)

Herb(s)	Disease	Part of the tree used for treatment	Preparation
1. *Kĩng'endya nthenge* (kleinia squarrosa) & *Kĩtũla* (commiphora baluensis)	Malaria & diaphragm	Bark from *kĩng'endya nthenge* & *kĩtũla* leaves	Boil *kĩtũla* leaves & the bark of *kĩng'endya nthenge* and drink when it cools down. Take it in the morning and evening for 2 days.
2. *Kĩng'endya nthenge* (kleinia squarrosa)	Malaria, cough & headache	Leaves	Smash the leaves and mix with water. Drink this till you feel better.
3 *Mũũkya* & milk	Whooping cough	Roots & Milk	Boil the roots and mix with milk and take it for 3-4 days.
4. a) *Kĩluma* (aloe vera)	malaria	leaves	Boil the leaves and drink I cup every morning and evening for one week.
b) *Kĩluma* (aloe vera)	Pneumonia	Leaves/sap	Apply the sap where it hurts.
5. a) Kĩuuku (terminalia brownie)	Stomachache	bark	Chew the leaves till they produce juice and swallow it.
b) Kĩuuku (terminalia brownie)	Cough	bark	Chew the leaves till they produce juice and then swallow.
c) Kĩuuku (terminalia brownie)	Yellow fever	bark	Boil the barks in salt-less chicken soup. Do not take salt, sugar or fermented milk while undergoing treatment.
6 a) Kĩtula (commiphora baluensis)	Toothache	Leaf	Chew the leaf till it produces some juice. However, do not swallow the juice.

b) Kĩtula (commiphora baluensis)	toothache	leaves	Boil the leaves and use the warm water to swash and then spit.
c) Kĩtula (commiphora baluensis)	Wound ache	leaves	Boil the leaves and use the water to massage the aching wound.
7. a) *Mũkenea* (zanthroxylum chalybeum)	Cough	bark	Boil the barks in water or you can boil them in tea. Take this concoction till the cough stops.
b) *Mũkenea* (zanthroxylum chalybeum)	flu	leaves	Boil the leaves in tea and drink.
8. a) *Mũvĩndavĩndĩ* (fagaropsis hildebrandtii)	Cleaning veins/blood cleaning	Bark	Boil the bark and drink.
b) Mũvĩndavĩndĩ (fagaropsis hildebrandtii)	worms	bark	Wash the barks, grind and dry in the sun. When dry, sieve and add water and drink.
9. a) *Kĩvela* (guava)	Diarrhea	Leaf	Crush the leaves in mortar and pestle and add water. Drink one cup every day until you feel better.
b) *Kĩvela* (guava)	Stomachache	leaves	Crush the leaves in mortar and pestle and add water. Also, you can boil and drink when cold.
10. a) ĩkũlino (cactus)	Stomachache	Leaf	Cut the leaf into small pieces and let it settle for a day in water and then drink the concoction a cup each day till you feel better.
b) ĩkũlino (cactus)	Diabetes	Fruit	Eat the fruit
c) ĩkũlino (cactus)	Duodenal ulcers	fruit	Soak the fruit in water for 10 minutes and then take it 3 times per day.
d) ĩkũlino (cactus)	kidneys	fruit	Burn the fruit into ashes and eat it.
11. a) ĩvavai (papaya)	intestine worms	seeds	Soak the seeds overnight in water in a cool place and drink the water.
b) ĩvavai (papaya)	toothache	roots	Smash the roots and drink the water.
c) ĩvavai (papaya)	Gonorrhea	Sap/ Milk	Drink the milk and apply the sap on the wound.

12. *Kalimi ka nthy'a*	Duodenal ulcers	Stem	Burn and then crush the stem into powder and put one teaspoonful into a cup of water. Drink 2 cups each day, morning and evening.
13. a) M*utĩ* (aspilia pluriseta)	Bleeding Wound or just a wound	leaf	Crush the leaves and put them on the bleeding wound to stop the bleeding.
b) *Mutĩ* (aspilia pluriseta)	earache	leaves	Crush the leaves and put the liquid in the ear.
15. a) *Mũsandũkũ* (eucalyptus)	Chicken pox	leaf	Boil the leaves and then bathe in this water.
b) *Mũsandũkũ* (eucalyptus)	Measles	Leaves	Boil the leaves and then bathe in this water
16. *Mũthiiti wa nthĩ*	Duodenal ulcers	bark	Grind the bark in mortar and pestle and then add water and drink the mixture.
17 a. *Mũkondu* (Sodom apple)	Toothache	leaf	Chew the leaves till they produce juice and then swallow.
b. *Mũkondu* (Sodom apple)	stomachache	roots	Chew the roots or grind the roots and add water and then swallow the juice twice a day.
c) *Mũkondu* (Sodom apple)	ringworms	fruit	Apply the juice from the fruit on the ringworms.
18. a) *Kamũthingii*	ulcers	The whole plant	Burn the whole plant into ashes and put one teaspoonful into a cup of tea.
b) *Kamũthingii*	Swelling with pus	roots	Grind the roots and put the liquid which comes out on the swelling.
19. a) *Mũlinga* (Moringa)	arthritis	leaf	Dry the leaves in the sun and grind into powder form and add to beef or chicken soup.
a) *Mũlinga* (Moringa)	Malaria	leaves	Leave the leaves in an aerated place for 72 hours then smash and drink the mixture.
20. a) *Mũ*kandu (ocimum gratissimum)	coughing	leaves	Warm the leaves on fire till they are soft then sniff it for 10 minutes.

b) *Mũ*kandu (ocimum gratissimum)	Mouth sores/Oral thrash	leaves	Chew the leaves.
c) *Mũ*kandu (ocimum gratissimum)	flu	leaves	Boil the leaves and drink.
21. Kakunini (Australian quinine)	malaria	leaves	Soak the leaves in a jug of water for one day. Drink one glass every day till you feel better.
22. a) *Mũtuuva* (Grewia similis)	Chest pain	leaves	Smash the leaves and add water. Drink one cup every morning and evening.
b) *Mũtuuva* (Grewia similis)	Mouth sore	roots	Burn the roots and chew twice per day for a week.
C) *Mũtuuva* (Grewia similis)	Heartburn	bark	Chew the inner part of the bark.
23. Mũkaawa (carissa spinarum)+ Mũvindavindi (fagaropsis hildebrandtii) + Mũkenea (zanthroxylum chalybeum)	Arthritis	roots	Boil the roots in one liter of water. Drink one glass each day.
24. Mũsovi (hoslundia iarrhea)+ mũkandu (ocimum gratissimum)	Kidney pain	leaves	Wash the leaves and crush them and drink, 3 times for 1 week.
25. Mũkenea (ocimum gratissimum)+ Kyũlũ (lippia javanica)+ Mũsemei (acacia nilotica)	flu	bark and roots	Boil the roots and barks of those trees then drink that water while cold 3 times a day for 3 days.
26. Kisakwa (corn cob) + kikata cha ilenge (peducle-pumpkin stem), + mũng'oi wa kiluma (flower stem of aloe vera).	Ulcers and duodenal	Corn cob+ peducle+ flower stem of aloe vera	Burn to ashes and lick.

26 out of the 91 herbs treat different illnesses. Hence, we labelled them "super herbs". For example, kĩluma (aloe vera) treats malaria and pneumonia; ĩkũlino (cactus) treats stomachache, diabetes, duodenal ulcers, and kidney pains; ĩvavaĩ (papaya) cleans kidneys and treats worms, toothache, and gonorrhea; *mũsandũkũ* (eucalyptus) treats chicken pox and measles; *mũkondu* (sodom apple) treats toothache, stomachache, migraine, and ringworms; *mũtaa* (night queen) treats stomachache and eye problems; *mũthiia* (acacia) treats cough and stomachache; kĩuuku (terminalia brownie) treats stomachache, cough, and yellow fever; *kĩtũla* (commiphora baluensis) treats toothache and wounds; *Mũkenea* (zanthroxylum chalybeum) treats cough and flu; *mũvĩndavĩndĩ* (fagaropsis hildebrandtii) cleans blood veins and clears worms; kamũthingii treats ulcers and burns; *mũkandu* (ocimum gratissimum) treats cough, mouth sores and flu; mũtuuva (grewia similis) treats chest pain and mouth sore; *mutĩ* (aspilia pluriseta) treats earache and a bleeding wound; *mũthulu* (croton megalocarpus) treats stomachache and kidney pains; mũvesa treats stomachache and ulcers; *mũlinga* (moringa) treats malaria and arthritis; *mũvou* (plectranthus barbatus) treats nausea and burns; *song'e* (oxygonum calycimum) treats

toothache and tooth sensitivity; mũthingii (ormocarpum kirkii) treats toothache, ulcers, and boils; *mũkũlũũ* (flueggea virosa) treats bleeding in women and tonsils; and *mũtheu* (rhus vulgaris) treats stomachache and diarrhea.

Additionally, it was observed that some diseases (e.g., see entries 23-26 on Table 1) are treated by mixing more than one herb. The following 8 diseases are treated by mixing different herbs. Malaria, one of the diseases, is treated by mixing *king'endya nthenge* (kleinia squarrosa) and *kĩtula* (commiphora baluensis). Both diabetes and high blood pressure are treated by mixing ĩkolovia (avocado) and ĩkũlino (cactus). Typhoid is treated by mixing *mũthulu* (croton megalocarpus), *mũkũlũũ* (flueggea virosa), and *kĩvela* (guava). Arthritis is treated by mixing *mũkaawa* (carissa spinarum) and *mũvĩndavĩndĩ* (fagaropsis hildebrandtii). Whooping cough is treated by mixing *mũluluĩ* (African date) and *mũthia* (acacia). Kidney pain is treated by mixing *mũsovi* (hoslundia iarrhea) and *mũkandu* (ocimum gratissimum). Finally, ulcers and duodenal ulcers are treated by mixing *kisakwa* (corn cob), *kĩkata kya* ĩlenge (peducle-pumpkin stem), and *mũng'oi wa kĩluma* (flower stem of aloe vera).

In addition, participants **observed and documented** the use of several herbs as **blood purifiers/tonics** (i.e., blood-strengthening) and **renal cleansers**; **twelve species** were recorded (see Table 2).

Table 2: Blood and Kidney purifiers

1. *Kĩngendya nthenge* (kleinia squarrosa),	Blood cleaning	bark	Crush the bark and add water. Drink 2 cups of water each day for 3 weeks.
2. Mũteta (strychnos henningsii)	Cleaning blood veins	bark	Crush the bark and add water. Drink 2 cups of water each day for 3 weeks.
3. Kĩva (pappea capensis)	Strengthening blood	bark	Crush the bark and add water. Drink 2 cups of water each day for 3 weeks.
4. Kĩvũti (erythrina abyssinica)	Strengthening blood	bark	Crush the bark and add water. Drink 2 cups of water each day for 3 weeks.
5. Mũkenea (zanthroxylum chalybeum),	Cleaning blood	bark	Crush the bark and add water. Drink 2 cups of water each day for 3 weeks.
6. Mũkya	killing germs in the blood	root	Crush the roots and add water. Drink 2 cups of water each day for 3 weeks.
7. Mũua (sclerocarya birrea)	Killing germs in the blood.	bark	Crush the bark and add water. Drink 2 cups of water each day for 3 weeks.

8. Mũsovi (hoslundia iarrhea)	Killing poison in herbs.	leaves	Crush the leaves and add to all the blood cleansers.
9. Mũvatha	Cleaning kidneys	bark	Crush the bark and add water. Drink 2 cups of water each day for 3 weeks.
10. Kĩthi (acacia gerrardii)	Cleaning blood	bark	Dry the bark under the sun and then grind it into powder and then add one spoonful into a glass of water. Drink 2 cups of water each day for 3 weeks.
11. Mũkaawa (carissa spinarum)	Cleaning blood	bark	Crush the bark and add water. Drink 2 cups of water each day for 3 weeks.
12. Ĩvavai (papaya)	Cleaning kidneys	Seeds	Crush the seeds into powder in a mortar and pestle. Lick the powder.

Discussion and Conclusion

A central finding of this project is that African communities must intentionally induct children and youth into ecological and pharmacobotanical knowledge. What unfolded was not an assignment to be completed and shelved, but a community learning event: knowledge moved bidirectionally. While young people learned from elders, some young parents also discovered local remedies through their children's documentation.

The preliminary data confirm a rich pharmacopoeia within the Kamba community. This knowledge merits systematic transmission to children and youth, both for health literacy and for conservation: when young people understand uses, they are less likely to destroy plants, and more likely to cultivate them—an ethic already modeled by practitioners who have begun growing key species on their farms (see Lisanza & Ndungo, 2024). Although community members often report that local remedies are well tolerated, claims about "no side effects" should be treated cautiously and subjected to clinical and pharmacological verification; dosage, preparation, contraindications, and interactions require careful study. The point is not to oppose "herbs" to "biomedicine," but to re-center indigenous pharmacopeias within Africa's health knowledge systems while building evidence and safety protocols locally. In this sense, reducing dependency on externally driven solutions (cf. Moyo, 2009) is not isolationism but capacity building: developing value chains—from documentation to cultivation, processing, and responsible clinical research—rooted in community priorities.

For schools, especially in rural areas, a practical implication is the creation of local inventories—written and digital—of plants, parts used, and preparations. Coupled with the project's trilingual protocol (Kikamba–Kiswahili–English), these inventories can anchor multiliteracies pedagogy. Even basic literacy tasks can be indigenized—e.g., using local plant names in alphabet drills—so that language learning simultaneously strengthens environmental knowledge. More broadly, decolonizing the curriculum means centering African

medicinal plants and languages across subjects, not confining them to occasional projects. Health professional schools should likewise incorporate herbal knowledge, ethnopharmacology, and community ethics into training, and collaborate on laboratory analyses to identify active compounds and safety profiles.

At the policy and industry interface, the findings point to the feasibility of community-linked pharmaceutical pathways: locally packaged herbal preparations, non-extractive harvesting, and species protection. Any commercialization must embed fair benefit-sharing, community stewardship of forests, and land rights, avoiding extractive practices that marked the colonial past. Local production can lower costs, strengthen health sovereignty, and generate youth employment in cultivation, processing, quality assurance, and research.

In sum, positioning children and youth as co-researchers and custodians of indigenous herbal knowledge proved both feasible and generative. It revitalized intergenerational circuits that schooling schedules had disrupted; it linked language, land, and health; and it suggested concrete curricular, research, and policy pathways. If scaled and sustained—with safeguards for safety, ethics, and ecology—such work can help Africa "become its own center" in health knowledge and linguistic sovereignty, while equipping the next generation to steward the environments and epistemologies that sustain them.

The findings indicate substantial potential within African Studies for children and youth to act as producers of epistemic authority, not merely recipients of knowledge. As the Kamba proverb reminds us—ũsĩ ũte *tũlũsĩ nũkaũkaa mitũkĩ* (*a river without tributaries soon dries up*)—knowledge that is not transmitted intergenerationally withers. Our results therefore underscore the importance of systematically involving young people in conserving and advancing herbal knowledge within African communities. The future of this knowledge is strongest where children recognize its value, and the future of the African languages that carry it is likewise secured when children speak those languages. Consistent with prior research, many African languages are endangered primarily because intergenerational transmission has been interrupted (Batibo, 2005). Mobilizing youth to use African languages—particularly by making visible their role as carriers of ethnobotanical expertise—is thus essential.

This, in turn, requires structural change. African languages must be centered in schools and other official domains, rather than relegated beneath former colonial languages that still dominate education, the judiciary, and public administration (Lisanza & Muaka, 2024). To maintain and empower African languages—and the knowledges they encode—they must function as languages of teaching, learning, and research, as well as of governance and justice.

In closing, the project points toward decolonial futures by consolidating youth agency, ecological knowledge, community regeneration, and linguistic sovereignty in a single, intergenerational practice: Agency. The African children and youth have the potential and power to be the custodians of herbal knowledge. They are not only able to keep this knowledge orally but also in written forms. The preservation of this knowledge orally and in print ensures continuity of this knowledge even after the old custodians have passed on. Also, the entire community having herbal knowledge ensures a healthier community which can work and provide service to the community. Such knowledge can prevent early deaths because of poor health. Africa is the only continent where life expectancy is less than 60 years. This can be reversed by using Africa's own herbs to take care of their health. However, for this to happen the Africans must be decolonized to believe in themselves right from infancy. In addition, the awareness that herbs are not witchcraft at a very young age is very important to remove the stigma which is associated with herbal medicine. This is exactly what this project is doing, educating the young people the importance of herbal knowledge.

Ecological knowledge. Ecological literacy fosters environmental stewardship. When children and youth understand the medicinal value of local trees and herbs, they begin protecting them from an early age. Deforestation and pollution intensify climate stress—seen in recurrent droughts across many African regions—

so cultivating youth knowledge helps sustain habitats and builds community resilience. In this project, children now value these plants as much as the adults around them; their inquiries have already prompted parents and other community members to invest in tending, planting, and protecting key species.

Community regeneration. Centering locally available—often freely gathered—herbal resources can improve everyday life and environmental care: once young people grasp the value of local plants, they help safeguard and sustain them. Building responsible African pharmaceutical pathways to source, standardize, and package these remedies will expand access—especially for urban populations—and create employment across cultivation, processing, and distribution. More broadly, strengthening such endogenous value chains reduces structural dependence on external aid and supports population health. African countries must think beyond external aid and leverage what they already have to secure the health of their predominantly young populations—the continent's greatest resource.

Linguistic sovereignty. The preliminary findings affirm that herbal knowledge is inseparable from the languages that encode it. Preserving Kikamba is therefore essential: without the language, the pharmacological lexicon and practices it carries are imperiled. Intergenerational transmission is the hinge—elders must deliberately pass this knowledge to the young, or it will fade. Oral teaching should be complemented by written documentation; as with Latin, Greek, and Geʿez, textualization secures memory across centuries. The charge extends beyond one community: African languages and the knowledge forms they hold must be centered, transmitted, and archived so that the epistemologies embedded within them remain authoritative and alive.

We close with Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai's admonition: "the generation which destroys the environment is not the one which suffers." The obligation before the present generation is clear—safeguard the ecologies that sustain medicinal plants and herbs so that future generations inherit both the knowledge and the living archives on which decolonial futures depend.

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