



# **SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN AFRICA IN AN AGE OF DISRUPTIONS**

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AFRICAN PEACEBUILDING NETWORK  
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## **ABOUT THE PROGRAM**

*Launched in March 2012, the African Peacebuilding Network (APN) supports independent African research on conflict-affected countries and neighboring regions of the continent, as well as the integration of high-quality African research-based knowledge into global policy communities. In order to advance African debates on peacebuilding and promote African perspectives, the APN offers competitive research grants and fellowships, and it funds other forms of targeted support, including strategy meetings, seminars, grantee workshops, commissioned studies, and the publication and dissemination of research findings. In doing so, the APN also promotes the visibility of African peacebuilding knowledge among global and regional centers of scholarly analysis and practical action and makes it accessible to key policymakers at the United Nations and other multilateral, regional, and national policymaking institutions.*

## **ABOUT THE SERIES**

*The APN Lecture Series provides an avenue for influential thinkers, practitioners, policy makers, and activists to reflect on and speak to the critical issues and challenges facing African peacebuilding. This publication series documents lectures given on the platform of the African Peacebuilding Network (APN) program, and its institutional partners. These lectures provide an analysis of processes, institutions, and mechanisms for, as well as the politics of peacebuilding on the continent, and contribute towards broadening debates and knowledge about the trajectories of conflict and peace in conflict-affected African countries and regions. The APN Lecture series seeks to address knowledge gaps in African peace and security, including its links to local, national, and global structures and processes. These publications also provide critical overviews and innovative reflections on the state of the field, including new thinking critical to knowledge production and dissemination in overlooked or emerging areas of African peacebuilding.*

# SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH<sup>1</sup> IN AFRICA IN AN AGE OF DISRUPTIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

When Dr. Cyril Obi, the APN and Next Gen Program Director, asked me to consider sharing my thoughts on social science research with participants at this workshop in the historic city of Casablanca, I did not hesitate to say yes, because throughout my academic career nothing has excited me more than being among scholars and sharing my views and research experiences with them. Research intrigues me because of its ability to lead to unknown paths and reveal unscripted outcomes. Furthermore, given my past few years of being in full-time executive administration, I have not had as much engagement with field research as I would have wished. So, in a sense, this workshop represents an opportunity to re-engage a subject that is both a personal passion and a form of professional therapy. Research takes me to places I may not ever visit, subject matters I may never have a chance to delve into, and arguments I would not probably encounter anywhere else. This lecture is also taking place at a time when the social sciences are under threat from market determinism that measures social value through so-called return on investment. In a 2013 TedxEuston Talk titled, "Telling the African Story," the late Ghanaian BBC journalist Komla Dumor explores the ways in which Africa has been reported and shares the following scenario that I think is a fitting introduction to what I will talk to you about today. Komla says:

*"Who is an Africa expert? How would you feel if you were watching me on telly one morning and, you know, 'good morning, my name is Komla Dumor. You are watching BBC News. Coming up this morning, we are going to have the latest from Syria where the rebels are on the offensive, conflict in Egypt, etc., etc. and we are going to speak to an expert on Haggis, that Scottish dish that everyone loves and how it affects cholesterol. So, we get to the Haggis interview, and I say, 'yes, research has shown that Haggis tastes great, but it may affect your blood pressure, etc., etc. Let's turn now to our Haggis expert at the University of Makerere."*

The audience bursts into laughter and Komla says,

*“It does seem odd though, but would you have the same reaction if I said we were going to talk about an African story and we had an expert in Washington or from London? Who is an Africa expert?”<sup>2</sup>*

I want to echo Komla's question and ask, who is an Africa expert? What constitutes expertise? And what is Africa? How does one become an Africa expert? Is living in one African country enough to bestow expertise? Does spending years undertaking the same activity in an African country bestow expertise? Does taking graduate classes on Africa and earning a Master's or Doctoral degree bestow expertise? Answers to these questions are critical because they inform our understanding of research and of Africa (however it may be construed/constructed) and inform writing that centers a country, community, or institution in Africa.

This presentation broadly explores the role of expertise in shaping the understanding of society through research and other forms of data collection in Africa that many of you gathered here today are involved in through the support of the Social Science Research Council's (SSRC) African Peacebuilding Network (APN) and Next Generation Social Science in Africa (Next Gen) program. I mention a few disruptions that I believe have particularly shaped social science research in Africa and need to be keenly studied to understand how they shape our work today. I argue that Komla Dumor's statements about Africa experts have a lot to do with those disruptions—disruptions that are related to economics, politics, culture, technology, and biology.

## DISRUPTION

The first major disruption was the colonial encounter driven by the European expansionist agenda that started with the slave trade and the search for cheap labor to boost Europe's plantation economies. This encounter produced and extended a world constructed around humans who belonged to racial categories representing hierarchies organized around alterity, superiority, inferiority, and notions of progressive civilization. Anthropologist Audrey Smedley argues that “Throughout the colonial world, there developed attitudes and beliefs about native peoples, about imported slaves, and about others that have nothing to do intrinsically with the physical characteristics of these peoples. Western-imposed racial values and stereotypes have captured the minds of multiple millions of people and affected the ways they interact with one another and with the West. Such values were inventions in the minds of politically powerful people, not

realities of the traditional societies or the natural world.”<sup>3</sup> These racial categorizations shaped social science research and assumptions about humans and their societies. The notions of “primitive,” “simple” or “backward” peoples often associated with Africa emerged out of this encounter. Societies that were operating under their own terms were disrupted and disoriented. Such disruptions and disorientations shape the nature of research undertaken on and by them. Many Africans today, for instance, identify themselves with tribes, a notion that was popularized by anthropology in its assumptions and studies of so-called “primitive societies.” The late African anthropologist and sociologist Archie Mafeje and late Bernard Magubane, also an anthropologist and sociologist, critiqued the notion of tribe and showed how anthropologists and other social scientists studying African communities conveniently applied the term to construct otherness in the African (and other) societies they studied.<sup>4</sup> Such constructions were based on the thinking about societies shaped by notions of evolution that placed Africans at the lowest level of the human stratum. Curiously, as David Sneath states, “although the concept of the tribe has been largely discredited and abandoned among Western-trained social and cultural anthropologists, the early anthropological promotion of the term was so successful that among the non-academic public worldwide, the category ‘tribe’ remains the single most prominent and dominant popular anthropological notion for imagining and referring to human society outside bureaucratic states.”<sup>5</sup> So my question to you today is what categories and naming structures are you applying in your study and why?

Economic disruption is tied to the colonial one because colonial processes were a total package comprising social, political, religious, and economic powers, assumptions, and assertions. The use of colonial economic systems with their embedded monetary, production, and trade systems all played a major part in disrupting and disorienting existing modes of production and exchanges of goods and value. Historians now confirm that African trade and cultural exchange extended beyond the continent long before encounters with European slavers and colonizers.<sup>6</sup> Trade between Africa, Asia, and Arabia occurred long before European and American trade with Africans. The exploits of West African kingdoms in present-day Mali, Ghana, and Benin as well as with East Africa as they traded with distant partners in China and Arabia are not in dispute.<sup>7</sup> With increased European-led slave trade and colonialism, many of these thriving economies dwindled and even disappeared as Africa was instituted into the European economic system that primarily created an exploitative infrastructure that disadvantaged Africa. This explains the continued imbalance in trade and economic production with most African nations producing and exporting raw materials to Europe and North America and in turn importing processed goods made from the same raw material exported.

Why is it that Switzerland and Belgium, which grow no cocoa, for instance, are considered the world's manufacturer of the best chocolate and not Cote d'Ivoire which provides 40 percent of the world's cocoa beans? Indeed, 40 percent of the world's chocolate is exported from Germany, Belgium, Italy, and Poland, countries that do not grow cocoa. Granted, the Swiss are known to be the largest consumers of chocolate per capita followed by other European and North American countries. With Africa's consumption of chocolate at less than 5 percent of the world's total consumption, the continent's major producers of cocoa use much of its arable land to grow cocoa that caters to other people's dessert preferences. During a recent trip to Accra, Ghana (another major producer of cocoa beans), I was happy to seek out local chocolate but was not lost to the fact that the majority of the chocolate available in the supermarket that I visited was imported.<sup>8</sup>

This imbalance in economic systems is reflected in the imbalance that prevails in the funding of research and education, with the bulk of research funds flowing into Africa coming from outside the continent. This I state without absolving African players of also contributing to the current challenges facing their economic systems. The global imbalance in economic systems has ramifications that continue to date. Indian scholar, environmental activist, food sovereignty advocate, ecofeminist, and anti-globalization author Vandana Shiva notes that "World hunger is primarily located in poor third world countries among rural agricultural communities." And asks, "why are people growing food going hungry themselves?" She explains that "they are going hungry because everything they grow has to be sold to pay for seeds and expensive chemicals." She talks about the use of food as a weapon of control that has led to the monocultural agriculture most poor countries engage in that ultimately causes hunger.<sup>9</sup> Scholarship undertaken today cannot ignore the underlying causes of the challenges present in the communities your work is focusing on, including work focused on peace.

The disruption associated with economics also extends to systems that are guided by a market-oriented philosophy that perceives growth and prosperity through the lens of free markets that are not controlled by governments. In the 1980s, African nations experienced this mostly through the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) that advocated for privatization and free market development instead of the state-led development that African nations preferred.<sup>10</sup> The measures were supposed to stimulate economic growth by removing government subsidies and support of social services, such as education and health-care, and instead leaving them to market forces. Many of the public institutions that were offering social services for economic growth carried their measure of blame as their inefficiency and mismanagement often curtailed the intended

prosperity they were supposed to bring to their citizenry. Nonetheless, pushing for economic structural adjustment when the same architects of the model were themselves involved in subsidizing their own citizenry was, to say the least, disingenuous. In the United States of America, for instance, farm subsidies have been operational since the great depression of the 1930s and 20.4 percent of total net farm income in the year 2019 comes from such subsidies.<sup>11</sup> Dissuading African nations from subsidizing their own farmers and social services had negative effects on several sectors, including higher education. Between 1986 and 1991, for instance, the World Bank guided African governments to make drastic reductions in their investment in higher education purportedly to increase efficiency and distribute resources equitably across all levels.<sup>12</sup>

As a result, higher education became a commodity to be sold in the market instead of a common good provided for and supported by the state. Students became customers whose primary interest in university education was as a means to a comfortable job and social success seen through the eyes of “deliverables,” “bottom line,” “value for money,” and “return on investment.” When the state is turned into a promoter of the free market instead of a provider of social services, even universities are turned into business entities that are left to compete with each other for “customers” by offering programs that the customers want and are willing to pay expensive fees for. Research funds also get reduced and scholarship in general suffers. In many African universities, programs in the social sciences and humanities were considered “useless” as the focus turned to information and communication technology (ICT); science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); and business studies in pursuit of “market-relevant” programs. Furthermore, universities, through their various units, were expected to build income-generating activities that underplayed or completely ignored research and scholarship. With the stifling of research funds and a culture of inquiry in the institutions, faculty turned to teaching machines, especially for short professional or executive courses. This practice endures to date.

The other disruption is related to technology. The rise of new technologies that have blurred the lines between the physical, digital, and biological has affected not only the speed of communication, but the role played by humans in dealing with everyday tasks as well. From self-driving cars to 3-D printing, artificial intelligence, and robotics, we are starting to wonder if science and technology are slowly replacing human beings. We are now inhabiting a world that requires innovators, creatives, enabling environments, and the right kind of infrastructure to understand and manage the results of this revolution and also do so for the good of society and its people. What happens to research when those being

studied have their own ways of representing themselves through tools availed through social media?<sup>13</sup> What happens to your research when a topic you are interested in becomes the subject of discussion in a WhatsApp group and the interest is not in the facts but in how many people forward or like the entries? How do you undertake your work and disseminate it in an age where anything more than 144 characters is not going to hold anyone's attention? Today, technology has provided unprecedented opportunities for multi-nation collaborations in research but even that must be approached with caution lest another system of exploitation and imbalance emerges. Many times, collaborations are not a result of mutual co-equal co-creation and results are useful for none of the parties involved. Omanga and Mainye (2019), in their piece tellingly titled "North-South collaborations as a way of 'not knowing Africa,'" describe their negative experience as African scholars participating in a research project that sought to evaluate the effectiveness of Ushahidi (a crowdsourcing platform) at monitoring electoral-related violence in Kenya. They found that the actual users of Ushahidi tended to be networks of international NGO employees, rather than Kenyans, and that this arrangement greatly biased the knowledge produced. They found that the relationship between digital innovation, NGOs, and funding agencies "reproduced a hierarchical, top-down 'developmental' logic, whose main inspiration was an uncritical techno-determinist rationality."<sup>14</sup> Approach or enter into collaborative work carefully and, before you sign below the dotted line, make sure there is no imbalance. In other words, disruptions in the world have led to certain perceptions and assumptions about humans, economic structures affected by imbalances and exploitative approaches, and technologies that change the ways in which we communicate and relate to each other.

## ENGAGED RESEARCH

Given this understanding of the different disruptions and how they have shaped social science thinking and research, how are you going to undertake your own research and writing? What blind spots are you going to avoid and how are you going to undertake your research to capture the integrity of the societies, communities, individuals, and places you are focusing on in your studies? How do you also build a culture of research that endures beyond the span of your current research funding? Remember that while we may often associate social science research with formal training, research as a human activity has been with us since the beginning of life. You are not entering into a craft unknown to you but rather getting involved in a continuum that has existed before you. Research is about curiosity and having an inquisitive mind. All societies have

both. Human beings have an endless curiosity about their own lives, the lives of others, the environment within which they live, and places and things far away from their immediate reach or context. This curiosity is enhanced by the desire to explain and interpret observed, lived, negotiated, and contested phenomena as well as the micro and macro forces that structure them. Because these social phenomena affect people's lives in concrete and profound ways, as researchers, we constantly engage in systematic studies developed in academic fields such as the social sciences that provide us with knowledge about them. But such knowledge, however deep and convincing it is, as I have shown above, comes from or is constructed and understood from a particular angle and perspective and is always incomplete.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, knowledge generated through observation or from respondents' narratives (as is common in anthropology) is limited to that which is accessible to the senses used. Such knowledge is therefore not only complex but also a collective entity that no single perspective or investigator can fully comprehend. That is why Komla's question of "Who is the Africa expert?" is so critical. As a researcher, you will need multiple angles, sources, and perspectives to get to your conclusions and disseminate them. Fellow anthropologist Francis Nyamnjoh argues that "ethnographic representations of Africa are often blindly crafted and served as delicacies without rigorous, systematic dialogue with the Africans in question."<sup>16</sup> The underlying assumptions about humans and their societies that emerged during the colonial disruption endure to date. It is no wonder that one can be an expert on Africa with limited knowledge and experience of Africa leading to the production of opinions or presentations about Africa without engaging with Africans. Pierre Bourdieu also shows that research is about multiple participants who comprise what he calls a "research group," which provides "strong collective censorship that is not only liberating but one that frees one from biases linked to his or her position and dispositions."<sup>17</sup>

Research is a community affair; it is about multiple participants working together to help diminish personal biases and/or limited perspectives that taint representations of a people, community, or society by an expert. You as researchers, therefore, will be well served when you understand that knowledge is to be produced collectively and with ample opportunities to check and countercheck it. Within academia this happens in the process we call peer review, where your work is subjected to scrutiny by experts to establish its authenticity and credibility. However, even peer reviewers and members of such teams have their own biases because they too bring on board their individual positions and dispositions. As you undertake your research, do not be content with one style, one perspective, or one approach. Also, avoid being content with the opinion of one person. Seek multiple sources of knowledge, different perspectives, approaches,

and reviewers. But whatever you do, please make sure you disseminate your work for further consumption by others. There is a great need for promoting research and publications about Africa from those living and experiencing life within Africa. These experiences, when theorized carefully, can produce much from which the rest of the world can learn. Such scholarship also provides important grounds for collaboration with others to build a more rounded understanding of the world from an African perspective.

Of all the world's continents, Africa has the largest share of the number of scholarly works by non-Africans compared to those by Africans themselves. In terms of social science research, Africa has had very low productivity compared to other parts of the world. As Paul Zeleza shows, "In 2013, Africa accounted for 2.4% of world researchers, compared to 42.8% for Asia, 31.0% for Europe, 22.2% for the Americas, and 1.6% for Oceania."<sup>18</sup> Your work as scholars must be motivated by, among other motivations, the need to address this imbalance in research-based knowledge production. Any opportunity you get to contribute to research should be seized. This means that you should do so even when you do not have research funds. By virtue of the places where you live and work, you have access to a lot of information and experiences that can be systematically gathered and turned into academic publications. We all go through our daily lives and experience the social phenomena that come with that living, meaning we know how best to describe and understand them and yet we are not central to producing scholarly material to capture these experiences and interpretations.<sup>19</sup> These everyday experiences should form and inform the essential parts of our scholarly work. They should be an important basis for building expertise. If you are a faculty member in a university, for instance, you have an opportunity to expand the knowledge we have about African universities—their management, student engagement with academic programs, and faculty experiences in the classroom, among others—by conducting studies in your institutions. Such studies need little, if any, funds.

At other times, we get opportunities and the capacity to undertake funded research including through the support you have received from SSRC. When you get such opportunities, make good use of them. Capitalize on the data collection and field experiences to sustain your writing and publications for long periods after the funds dry up. Unfortunately, many of us see such research opportunities not as avenues through which to pursue, generate, and disseminate much-needed research-based knowledge about their immediate environs, but as conduits for personal gain and will only undertake research when someone is paying for it. At times, even when they do not have a real interest in the topic of study, some researchers will pursue studies simply because there are available

funds. In such a situation, it is not uncommon to find a scholar who sees a call for proposals for research on going to the moon, for instance, and immediately sends a proposal even though that scholar has never considered such a topic for study or as something that is immediately relevant to that scholar's guild or environ. I am convinced that research is best undertaken on a topic that interests you as the researcher, one that you will pursue with or without someone funding it, and one that you believe has relevance for your context.

My own research started from what I would consider serendipity. Not because I had seen a call for proposals, but because I was in the right place at the right time. I remember it very vividly. I was, at the time, in my first year of my Master's program. I was riding in a Matatu number 45 going from Nairobi city to Kenyatta University. I had only been in the program for a few months. Then I heard it—a song by Ramathan Mtoro Ongala, a Congolese musician who had moved to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and made it his home. He had his own band and produced several popular songs. One of his songs was playing on the radio in the Matatu following a request by a listener on the show that was on at the time. The song is titled “Kifo” (death) and, though I had heard the song before, there was something different about it on this day. It was exactly six years since someone very close to me passed away. I found myself choking up as I remembered that I had not fully understood the cause of death and had had no opportunity to fully understand it. I paid more attention to the lyrics. Here was a song in which the artist was having a conversation with death. He was engaging with matters that I had not heard engaged with in my daily life but which I have always thought about. Why is it that we did not talk much about death? Why is it that I never got a full explanation of what really killed my loved one? Here is an excerpt from the song with my loose translation into English:

*Kifo kifo, siku yangu ikifika  
Kifo uniarifu mapema,  
niage wanangu, niage familia yangu yote,  
Niage mke wangu,  
pesa zangu nizigawanye,  
zimebaki nizile mwenyewe  
Kifo nitakusubiri kwa hamu  
Kifo uniambie tukutane wapi  
Hata hospitalini nitakwenda mwenyewe kwa miguu  
Sitakulaumu tena kifo we,  
nimeacha msimamo nyuma yangu  
Kifo kifo, kifo hakina huruma*

*Death, oh death, when my day comes  
Death alert me in good time  
So I can say goodbye to my family  
I say goodbye to my wife  
I divide up my money  
Whatever remains I spend on myself  
Oh death, I will wait for you eagerly  
Oh death tell me where to meet you  
I will even walk to the hospital  
I will not blame you any more  
I will have left my wishes behind  
Oh death, death has no mercy.*

This dialogue with death at first shocked and then intrigued me. I started wondering why I had never heard people in everyday conversations ask such questions about death. I started imagining what it would take to fully understand death and the mystery surrounding it. What was it about this musician, about music itself, that made it possible to publicly engage with a topic that was taboo in my sociocultural circles? How was the music received by his fans? Why did the listener who requested the song choose that song? These questions were not only intellectual but personal. I had a stake in finding out their answers. Right there and then I made a decision that would change my academic life. I decided that the man and his music would form the core of my Master's research. I was excited. I have never heard anyone engage with death so publicly. Indeed, it is almost taboo to talk about death in such a clear way. What I knew at the time was that death was not a topic for private let alone public discourse. I started preparing my proposal to study his music and presented it to my department as part of my project to fulfill the requirements for my Master's degree.

When I completed all requirements for the project and was granted permission to carry out field research in Tanzania two other things happened—I had my first taste of ethnographic research and got a glimpse of how Remmy Ongala's approach to social issues was admired by others. At the time, I was in the Department of Kiswahili and Other African Languages and had not been trained in ethnographic research methods that later became my *modus operandi*. I received my then-standard research funds totaling Kshs. 10,000 from my university and carried out my work. Upon arriving in Dar es Salaam to start my research, my host mentioned that a UN agency worker was frantically looking for the musician because he had just composed and produced another song titled "*Mambo kwa Soks*" (things with socks) that was advising people to engage in protected sex at a time when no one wanted to talk about sex in the wake of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In the song, Remmy Ongala chose to talk about safe sex by using the analogy of playing soccer and asking players to make sure they have boots and socks on. The initial research on the music of Remmy Ongala which started in a Matatu in Nairobi led to four other research projects on popular music. Indeed, I owe my career to that one moment of hearing the song "*Kifo*" play on the radio on my way to the university many years ago. There was no fanfare, no call for proposals, no planned intervention, just serendipity. Along the way, I found popular music to be an important research topic and tool. What led to your current study? How does it connect to you personally and intellectually? Is it a topic for which you can undertake further research without further funding? I ask these questions because when we undertake research driven by external interests (with funding on topics barely relevant to your own environs or individual interests) we may not be able to sustain it.

Many of us in the African social science community have been drawn to research and intellectual conversations that may not have been generated from our own contexts or ones that amplify issues that are a priority in our contexts. As a result, we become conduits to studies of other people's interests or perceptions of us. As African scholars, you must contribute to scholarship by striving to write and understand Africa on its own terms acknowledging that the Africa expert is sometimes that person, we overlook in search of those who we have come to associate with unquestioned knowledge production. The recent challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic is a good example. Research shows that "Africans contributed just 3% of the global share of 36, 326 indexed publications on SARS-CoV-2/ COVID-19 ten months into the pandemic."<sup>20</sup> And yet, there is much the world can learn from Africans' experiences with the pandemic. Who can forget the predictions by some Western pundits of how Africans will be dropping like flies due to Covid-19 because of their weak medical systems? The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) predicted this in April 2020: "Anywhere between 300,000 and 3.3 million African people could lose their lives as a direct result of COVID-19, depending on the intervention measures taken to stop the spread. Africa is particularly susceptible because 56 percent of the urban population is concentrated in overcrowded and poorly serviced slum dwellings (excluding North Africa) and only 34 percent of the households have access to basic hand washing facilities."<sup>21</sup> And who can forget the surprise the same pundits had when they realized that the same systems they thought were advanced in the Western world were not as strong to alleviate massive death in those countries as those in Africa? Of course, new explanations had to be found to explain the failure of their predictions to come true, including arguments that Africans were not fully reporting their death toll from Covid-19. Better explanations exist.

In an important study, Njenga, et.al., for instance, argue that "low seeding rate, effective mitigation measures, population that is more youthful, favorable weather, and possible preexisting immunity due to prior exposure to other coronaviruses" account for African's low infection rates compared to those in Europe and North America.<sup>22</sup> There is need for more studies if we are to change the overwhelming reality of Africans being treated as objects to be studied and represented by others, to a world where Africans are subjects who study and represent themselves. Further, the world can learn a thing or two about immunity and approaches to everyday living including exposure to germs and contaminants. Scholars like you need to engage in what is called reflexive praxis, which means being aware of our ability to change the scholarly reality of Africa and Africans by showing that what others think of Africa and Africans cannot be understood from assumptions rooted in the past. Such interventions start by being aware

that, when it comes to social science research and writing, we have often been objects (passive individuals observed by others) rather than subjects (active individuals with agency) in the larger realm of social science scholarship. Today, African-centered organizations and research players such as those you come from, including the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society (CASAS), the Organisation of Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OS-SREA), the Makerere Institute for Social Research (MISR), the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), the Wits Institute for Social Economic Research (WIS-ER), the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR), and the African Academy of Sciences (AAS), among others, are championing such scholarship.<sup>23</sup> These organizations and institutes, along with scholars affiliated with them, are continually making sure, through research and publications, that African voices are central in telling the African social science story. However, more still needs to be done and you need to do your part in spreading this message.

## **AFRICA ON ITS TERMS**

As an African scholar, you are expected to contribute to that body of scholarship by striving to write and understand Africa on its terms and in a way that represents and captures high international scholarly standards. To change the overwhelming reality of Africans as objects to be studied and represented by others to subjects who study and represent themselves, you will need to work very hard at the research, scholarly writing, and dissemination of your findings. We can only change the way Africa is understood and represented by doing a good job of contributing to the dearth of knowledge produced on Africa, in Africa, and by Africans through rigorous research, publishing, and dissemination of scholarly work of a high caliber. We particularly need to produce work that counters the pervasive negative narratives about Africa. We need to tell the African story and be the Africa experts Komla Dumor is talking about.

As Sri Lankan linguist Sureshi Canagarajah argues, although a significant amount of knowledge in the world is obtained from the periphery (contexts other than the west), the western Academy (the center), has monopolized knowledge production by dominating the publishing industry.<sup>24</sup> This monopoly accounts for the privileging of research by scholars from western academies and marginalizing knowledge production in the Global South, especially in Africa. There are several reasons for this inequality. Scholars from the Global North are more connected to major journals and technological advancements in their contexts including

the availability of funding, continuous networking through conferences, and exposure to other knowledge communities. In sharp contrast, in most African countries, internal constraints include the absence of a research culture evidenced in the insignificant amount of funding devoted to research and development; low figures of students enrolled in public universities (where there is inadequate or substandard research and writing skills); the emergence of a lucrative consultancy market which has diverted many academics and researchers away from scholarly research; and the absence of good quality (peer-reviewed) publishing venues (with the rise of predatory journals and publishers). As young and potentially powerful African scholars, you should bear in mind the notion of “subordinate integration,”<sup>25</sup> which is evidenced when research agendas are defined and produced in central research groups, often in the Global North, and then subsequently adopted by “satellite teams” often in the Global South as a precondition for their integration. In this process, be careful that the knowledge you will produce based here in the Global South is not integrated and absorbed into the dominant knowledge of the Global North in a subordinated way. Professor Ondari Okemwa of Machakos University in Kenya argues that there is an invisibility of articles and papers published by African scholars and even when they are in reputable journals, such papers may be cited less often.<sup>26</sup>

You are probably aware of the intense pressure in academia to quote dominant theories and authors from the West so that one can be published and belong. Such a practice leads to a situation where a publication from the periphery will often be full of authors from the center in its citation even when the content and relevance are clearly for a local audience.<sup>27</sup> It is important to publish but do so from an African perspective to overcome these knowledge disparities.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, it is imperative that you show an awareness of this epistemic inequality in your own literature review and references. I hope that in your work here or elsewhere you will endeavor to strengthen your writing by knowing and applying African sources and scholarship with the aim of contributing to efforts that expand contextualized and critically reflective stances in social science research in Africa. Since all of you here are focusing on a common theme why would you not cite each other’s work? Imagine what your citation index would look like if you included all the hundreds of works on peacebuilding that have been conducted by you and other scholars under the APN project.

Reflecting on my own research, I am particularly drawn to research and writing that provides an alternative voice. After completing my study of Remmy Ongala’s music, I realized that he was keen on articulating issues on behalf of the weak, including women. As I argue elsewhere, “In analyzing Remmy’s songs, I

was particularly drawn to a song titled “Fatuma,” in which Remmy came to the defense of a woman who had seemingly succeeded economically in a male-dominated world despite various cultural and economic barriers. Remmy was using the song to challenge the demeaning position that society had created for the woman.”<sup>29</sup> I became curious to see what women popular musicians were doing in presenting their own issues. That is how I ended up with a project on taarab songs with a focus on female musicians.<sup>30</sup> The project extended into my doctoral work but this time in response to a certain narrative I had picked up in my graduate studies that tended to depict Muslim women as cultural oppressed because of their faith. Later, when I saw arguments about the devastating effects of globalization on African countries, I sought an alternative voice and embarked on hip-hop music as a genre that was benefiting from globalization. If you read my work, you will thus see that the running thread is to offer an alternative view of an existing idea or narrative.<sup>31</sup>

## SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Let me end by inviting you to consider two approaches to research that might help you address the challenges of knowledge production we are engaged in here today. The first one is what I refer to as an *Afrocentric* framing of research questions and practices. This refers not only to how Africa and Africans are defined and understood but also how questions about how best to understand and write about both will emerge. Framing research from an *Afrocentric* standpoint starts with the assertion that Africans are subjects and agents of their own lived realities as opposed to being objects within a Western frame of reference.<sup>32</sup> Both the subject and object of research are culturally and socially immersed in a shared ethos. Cameroonian scholar Bame Nsamenang's work, for instance, critiques Euro-American views on human development and intelligence, arguing that such views have been presented as applicable to all human diversity even though they greatly differ from African worldviews. He shows that in an African worldview, knowledge is not “separated into discrete disciplines but interwoven into a common tapestry that is learned in a participatory curriculum.”<sup>33</sup> You as individuals in the institutions and communities to which you belong have a very personal connection to the research you are carrying out, both directly as participants in the lives of the people you are studying or indirectly through the effects that such research has on your life and work.<sup>34</sup> In this way research cannot be reduced to merely the collection and production of value-free scientific knowledge.

The second approach shows my own bias as an anthropologist and training in research. It is *in-depth qualitative research* that allows for a more nuanced understanding of social realities that are lived out and expressed by the people you study. Engaging in in-depth qualitative research supports the first approach by letting local realities inform the outcomes of each study especially in framing relevant questions to ask. This approach is best exemplified through ethnographic research where a deep understanding of the content and context of your study is derived from long residence and interactions with the field. Archie Mafeje's interventions on how to understand African agrarian communities, as well as African urban dwellers, are a result of in-depth ethnographic research. There is no substitute for being in the place where life is lived daily as you seek to understand it or its people. Erving Goffman's influential book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* argues that when individuals meet face-to-face, one tries to control or guide the impression the other may have of him/her by manipulating the setting appearance or manner while the other is trying to form and gather information to better understand the interaction. For Goffman, humans have different roles and identities in society, and they try to perform each one of them according to the setting and circumstances present.

In anthropology, the work of Victor Turner on social dramas developed from his work in Zambia extended this argument by Goffman to show that life is not a sequence of neat realities that fall into preconceived categories that were often captured in ethnographies. While Goffman saw all of the world as a stage, Turner saw life as drama best noted where there is a crisis so, if daily life is theatre, then social drama is a kind of metatheatre. Another anthropologist named Clifford Geertz, who shot into the limelight with his "interpretive anthropology" approach, saw culture as text and called for thick description as a preferred method of writing methodology. This approach, as Geertz showed in his popular write-up on "The Balinese Cockfight," allows an ethnographer to interpret a culture by understanding how the people within that culture are interpreting themselves and their own experiences. For Geertz, culture is performed for the insiders and outsiders can only peek into that performance. When it is performed for the outsider, it becomes a façade and a performance. This approach to culture and lived experiences developed by many scholars from the West has been popular among Africans but approached differently.

I personally consider Chinua Achebe's book *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *The River Between*, and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, to name but a few African writings, some of the best ethnographic texts produced. While they are placed in the category of fiction and creative writing, they relate lived experiences

in such clarity and proximity to the actual that they are extremely useful in understanding the communities from where they emanated. Our African creative writers are ethnographers in their own right and we as African scholars ought to pay more attention to their work than we often do. Indeed, creative artists and writers tell African stories better than ethnographers can. I place musicians in that category too, hence my own continued interest in popular music as a subject and tool of ethnographic research. In ethnographic research, you ought to have an understanding of the location, community, or people you are focusing on in such a way that the people in the story can recognize themselves and, when they are through reading your work, be able to say, "it is like we wrote it ourselves." That, for me as a scholar, is the highest mark of confidence. I seek to write my work so that the people I write about find not only their voices in the work but themselves too. This was affirmed on two occasions—first when the late Ali Mazrui referred his readers interested in gender and identity performance among the Waswahili to my 2003 book, *Gender Identity and Performance*, focusing on *taarab* music among the Waswahili of Coastal Kenya. The second one was when, after reading the final draft of my manuscript on his music, Julius Owino (Juliani) who is the subject of my 2016 book, *The Street is My Pulpit*, said, "it is like I wrote it myself." Juliani provided the foreword to the book.

In my work, I have sought to write from a position of thinking about the people I study. I ask myself how they would react were they to get a hold of my books and papers. This has never been so clear as when in 2002 I was with an elder from the Samburu community in Kenya on a study trip to Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater. When we stopped at the souvenir shop at the gate the students on the trip were picking up some postcards. Then the elder looked keenly at one of the postcards labeled "Maasai woman," and then turned to me and said, "that is my friend's daughter," and went ahead to name her family name and clan. Suddenly, the souvenir took on a very different identity. The person in the photo was known to someone close to me. I am sure the person who took the photo may not have had any real interaction with her, she just represented a certain image he/she had an interest in and became a commodity on a postcard. How would you feel if you found your photo on a postcard being sold in another country? How do you represent those people you interact with in your research? Would they be proud of your work should they have access to it? Who are you writing for? Why are you undertaking the work that brought you here? For many of you, I know you want to be the next superstar in your field. But I want to ask you, "then what?" Some of you will be stars not because that is your major focus, but because your work will be developed in service to your countries, to your institutions, to your communities, your continent, and to humanity. That is the star I would want to be associated with as a reader.

## NOTES

1. Throughout this presentation I will use “social science” to denote any branch of academic study or science that deals with human behavior in its social and cultural aspects as expressed through such disciplines as anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science, and economics. See <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-science> for more.
2. Watch the talk titled “Telling the Africa Story” available at <https://youtu.be/DfJn8HCKO8g> accessed on 14th September 2022.
3. Smedley, Audrey, “Race: The Reality of Human Differences: Vincent Sarich and Frank Miele’s Use of History,” *Transforming Anthropology* 14, no. 1 (2006): 53-59.
4. See, Archie Mafeje, “The Ideology of Tribalism,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 9, no. 2 (1971): 253–61 and Ben Magubane, “A Critical Look at Indices Used in the Study of Social Change in Colonial Africa,” *Current Anthropology* 12, (1971): 4-5.
5. Sneath, David, “Tribe,” In *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, edited by Felix Stein, 2016. Online: <http://doi.org/10.29164/16tribe>.
6. See Cheikh Anta Diop’s 1974 book, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*. Translated from the French by Mercer Cook. New York: L. Hill
7. See Sarathi, Akshay, ed., *Early Maritime Cultures in East Africa and the Western Indian Ocean*, (Archaeopress Publishing Ltd.; Duyvendak, 2018); Jan Julius Lodewijk, *The Book of Lord Shang*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928); Cartwright, Mark, “The Spread of Islam in Ancient Africa,” *World History Encyclopedia* available at <https://www.world-history.org/article/1382/the-spread-of-islam-in-ancient-africa/>, accessed September 24, 2022.
8. I visited Ghana in mid-June 2022 and visited Accra Mall located close to Kotoka International Airport.
9. Watch Vandana Shiva’s talk on the real cause of world hunger here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEqS6rnoyYc>. Accessed September 24, 2022.
10. See, Ntarangwi, Mwenda, *East African Hip Hop, Youth Culture and Globalization*. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009) for a discussion of how structural adjustment programs affected many African nations.
11. See, “Total net Farm Income and Government Payments,” at <https://usafacts.org/articles/federal-farm-subsidies-what-data-says/> for examples of farm subsidies provided by the US government to its farmers.
12. See, Caffentzis, G., “The World Bank and education in Africa” in: S. Federici, G. Caffentzis & O. Alidou, Eds, *A thousand flowers: Social struggles against structural adjustment in African universities* (pp. 3–18), (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000).
13. See my discussion of how Louise Linton’s article “How My Dream Gap Year in Africa Turned into a Nightmare” was engaged with by Zambians leading to her professional censure at Ntarangwi, Mwenda, “African Participation in, and Perspectives on, the Politics of Knowledge Production in Africanist Anthropology,” in Grinker, Lubkemann, Steiner, and

- Gonçalves, eds. *A Companion to the Anthropology of Africa*, (Wiley-Blackwell Companion series, 2019), pp. 439-458.
14. Omanga, Duncan Mainye, & Mainye, Pamela Chepngetich, "North-South collaborations as a way of 'not knowing Africa': Researching digital technologies in Kenya." *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 31, no. 3 (2019), 273-275.
  15. See Nyamnjoh, Francis B., "Transforming African Scholarly Writing: Politics of Knowledge Production, Mobility, and Conviviality," *African Peacebuilding Network APN Lecture Series* No. 8 (2022), for an analysis of research and incompleteness.
  16. Nyamnjoh, Francis, "Blinded by Sight: Divining the Future of Anthropology in Africa," *Africa Spectrum* 47, no. 2-3 (2012): 63-92.
  17. Bourdieu, Pierre, *Science of Science and Reflexivity*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
  18. Paul Zeleza, "Developing a Vibrant Research Culture for Africa's Development" presentation made at the Institute of Diplomacy and International Studies, School of Humanities, University of Nairobi, Post-Graduate Seminar on "Rethinking Science, Technology and International Relations in the Digital Age" Olepolos Country Club, May 11, 2019.
  19. Research activity in Africa and academic publishing constitute a fraction of the overall international research output. The annual average output of academic products in the continent (excluding South Africa) between 1999 and 2008 was roughly 27,000. This is not surprising given the average enrollment rate for tertiary education of just about 5 percent.
  20. Kana M.A., LaPorte R., Jaye A., "Africa's contribution to the science of the COVID-19/SARS-CoV-2 pandemic," *BMJ Global Health* 6 (2021): 1-5, available at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33648978/>.
  21. United Nations, Economic Commission for Africa; United Nations, Economic Commission for Africa (2020-04), "COVID-19 in Africa: protecting lives and economies," Addis Ababa. <https://hdl.handle.net/10855/43756>
  22. M. Kariuki Njenga, Jeanette Dawa, Mark Nanyingi, John Gachohi, Isaac Ngere, Michael Letko, C. F. Otieno, Bronwyn M. Gunn, and Eric Osoro, "Why is There Low Morbidity and Mortality of COVID-19 in Africa?", *American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* 103, no. 2 (2020,): 564-569, available at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32484156/>
  23. Explore further these African-Centred research entities here:  
<https://www.codesria.org/>  
<https://misr.mak.ac.ug/>  
<http://www.casas.co.za/>  
<http://www.ossrea.net/>  
<http://www.hsrc.ac.za/>  
<https://wiser.wits.ac.za/>  
<https://www.pasgr.org/>  
<http://www.aasciences.africa/>

24. Sureshi Canagarajah, A., *A Geopolitics of Academic Writing*, (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002).
25. Kreimer and Meyer T., "Research in the university: Contextual sub-Optimisation or Epistemic Subordination? Some Introductory Considerations" in *Universities as Centers of Research and Knowledge Creation: An Endangered Species*, ed. Hebe Vessuri and Ulrich Teichler, 12, no. 10 (2008).
26. Ondari-Okemwa, E., "Scholarly publishing in sub-Saharan Africa in the twenty-first century: Challenges and opportunities," *First Monday*, 12, no.10 (2007), <https://firstmonday.org/article/view/1966/1842>.
27. Omobowale, A.O., Akanle, O., Adeniran, A.I. and Adegboyega, K., "Peripheral Scholarship and Context of Foreign Paid Publishing in Nigeria," *Current Sociology* (2013), DOI:10.1177/0011392113508127, online December 17, 2013.
28. Publishing from an African perspective means being aware of African scholarship in your field and acknowledging their work. It further means that you understand the politics of citations and how certain authors become "stars" and building your own work and colleagues to get to similar positions.
29. Ntarangwi, Mwenda, *Reversed Gaze: An African Ethnography of American Anthropology*, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), p.6.
30. Taarab is a word used in East Africa derived from Arabic that denotes a type of music based on stringed instruments. It is influenced by Egyptian and Indian music, with melodies often performed at weddings. You can learn more about Taarab music in Kenya from my book, *Gender Identity and Performance: Understanding Swahili Culture Through Taarab* published in 2003 by Africa World Press (AWP).
31. In this presentation, I have used a total of 31 sources I consider experts. 17 of them are Africans not because they are the only ones making articulations of issues in ways that I find compelling, but because I understand that even in knowledge production, one has to make certain choices and those choices are political.
32. Mkabela, Queeneth, "Using the Afrocentric Method in Researching Indigenous African Culture," *The Qualitative Report* 10, no. 1 (2005), pp. 178-189. I have articulated these thoughts in Ntarangwi, Mwenda, *Annotated Bibliography on Children and Youth in Africa* (2001-2011), (Dakar: CODESRIA Books, 2014).
33. B. Nsamenang, "Human Ontogenesis: An Indigenous African View on Development and Intelligence," *International Journal of Psychology* 41, no. 4 (2006): 293-297, pp. 294.
34. Ntarangwi, Mwenda, *Annotated Bibliography on Children and Youth in Africa* (2001-2011), (Dakar: CODESRIA Books, 2014).

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*Prof. Mwenda Ntarangwi, PhD is currently the Deputy Principal in charge of Academics, Students, and Research at NIRUC, a Constituent College of NDU-Kenya. He is the immediate former CEO and Commission Secretary for the Commission for University Education (CUE). He holds a B.Ed. (Language Education) and MA (Swahili Cultural Studies) from Kenyatta University and an MA and PhD (Cultural Anthropology) from the University of Illinois, USA. Prof. Ntarangwi has extensive experience as a teacher, scholar, researcher, and administrator having taught anthropology and carried out research for two decades in different capacities in Kenya and in the USA. Prof. Ntarangwi is widely published on popular culture, youth culture, African Christianity, and the practice of anthropology and is a sought-after speaker globally. His publications include the following books: **The Street is My Pulpit: Hip Hop and Christianity in Kenya**, 2016, University of Illinois Press; **Reversed Gaze: An African Ethnography of American Anthropology**, 2010, University of Illinois Press; **Jesus and Ubuntu: Exploring the Social Impact of Christianity in Africa**, 2011, Africa World Press; **East African Hip Hop: Youth Culture and Globalization**, 2009, University of Illinois Press; and, **Engaging Children and Youth in Africa: Methodological and Phenomenological Issues**, 2015, CODESRIA Books. His other publications include 43 journal articles, book chapters, and encyclopedia entries; 29 book reviews and opinion pieces, and 155 conference paper presentations and/or keynote speeches around the world. Prof. Ntarangwi serves on a number of editorial boards for international journals including **African Studies Review (US)**, **Dialectical Anthropology (US)**, **On Knowing Humanity Journal (US)**, **The Sociological Quarterly (US)**, and **AFRICA: Journal of the International African Institute (UK)**. He is currently working on a novel on the effects of Covid-19 on social relations in Kenya and a manuscript on his experiences in executive leadership in Kenya.*