



# **TRANSFORMING AFRICAN SCHOLARLY WRITING: POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION, MOBILITY, AND CONVIVIALITY**

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*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.*

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# TRANSFORMING AFRICAN SCHOLARLY WRITING: POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION, MOBILITY, AND CONVIVIALITY

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*This 2022 keynote lecture for the African Peacebuilding Network (APN) and Next Gen Fellows Virtual Writing and Dissemination workshop begins with the assertion that African scholarship needs to be undertaken in full cognizance of the politics of knowledge production and consumption globally. African scholarship, like all scholarship, must be conducted rigorously, follow scientific methods, account for context, and stand up to critical appraisal. Why, however, refer specifically to “African scholarly writing?” African scholarly writing has been characterized by an outward gaze and internal and external pressures to respond to Eurocentric expectations and publication outlets. This has occurred despite the growing number of quality African publishing houses and the greater availability of their publications thanks to creative partnerships and the use of digital innovations.*

*Decolonization—an aspiration eternally in vogue—would require Africans to quit downplaying, disparaging, and demeaning the familiar and the local while they celebrate that which is far away and unfamiliar. Africa moves and has always moved. How we research and write about Africa and Africans must reflect the reality of a continent and people on the move. We need not provide monologues and single stories but rather explanations of complex predicaments and insights into people’s everyday aspirations and encounters that inform their being. This would begin to constitute the sort of convivial scholarship the continent deserves and which its nimble-footed and nimble-minded people are uniquely positioned to produce. One cannot do justice to a fast-moving subject matter by staying glued to the same conceptual, methodological, and analytical preconceptions, routinizations, and predictabilities. If our scholarship is truly participatory and provides for African mobilities, it will be well placed to develop innovative conceptual and methodological tools to enhance understandings of the nuanced complexities and compositeness of Africa and Africans permanently on the move.*

## INTRODUCTION

Knowledge production in a world of the unacknowledged universality of incompleteness and mobility is not just a technical, professional, and presumably objective exercise to be confined to book publishers and peer review processes as impartial mediators. As used here, incompleteness is not an inadequacy to feel inferior about, but rather, a norm or disposition to recognize and provide for in our actions and interactions with fellow humans, and with the world out there, both real and imagined. Such recognition of incompleteness and provision for the cross-fertilization of ideas should be within and between disciplines, and between researchers/scholars/academics and those outside the academy. As long as scholarship is undertaken in a world where the dominant template continues to be one of conquest, domination, and zero-sum games of superiority and supremacy, a world in which the universality of humanity is subjected to hierarchies of visibility and credibility, one can ill afford to ignore the politics and ethics of scholarly research, writing, publication, and consumption.

Context (social, cultural, economic, and historical) and interconnecting local and global power relations matter in what is produced and served up as scholarship, especially in a world stubbornly immersed in hierarchies of race, ethnicity, place, space, class, gender, sexuality, generation, mobility, belonging, and citizenship, to name just a few. A world fixated with ambitions of completeness, however illusory, de-emphasizes the mutuality of debt and indebtedness, and denies the compositeness of being and belonging. It refuses to acknowledge and provide for the universality of incompleteness and mobility.

The sociology and ethnography of actual practices in knowledge production in and on Africa, I argue, are best understood by what I have described as convivial scholarship. This is a scholarship driven by the understanding that, as human beings, we are always in the process of becoming through encounters, interconnections, interdependencies, compositeness, and the mutuality of debt and indebtedness once we acknowledge and provide for our incompleteness and mobility. The argument is for convivial scholarship that is relevant, self-critical but not self-punishing, adaptive, reflexive, and attuned to the temporal and spatial contexts within which scholars write.

## SCHOLARLY WRITING: BEYOND SPECIFICATION

Scholarly writing beyond specification is a craft that scholars are expected to nurture and develop. If writing, in general, is a craft, writing for scholarly publishing

is particularly so. The pressure scholars come under to publish or perish means that often too many scholars are chasing after too few scholarly outlets—like journals and books. This renders scholarly publishing very competitive, with the implication that many scholars might fall by the wayside even when they've got very interesting research results to share with the wider scientific community. With opportunities come opportunisms, and the world of publishing is no exception to this dynamic.

Just as each research process is supposed to go through steps that include 1) choosing a scientifically and socially relevant topic and designing a research project; 2) determining the methods and data collection techniques; 3) operationalizing the project; 4) analyzing the data; 5) presenting the results; and 6) sharing the findings, so too is the scholar expected to explain the basic steps they followed to arrive at what they are now sharing with the wider scientific community. The emphasis is on a critical understanding of the values, assumptions, and motivations that underpin research cultures, traditions, and practices.

Just like in research, it helps in scholarly writing if authors can situate themselves in a given field, area of study, or discipline because that permits assessors and peer-reviewers to know what pool of basic assumptions or theoretical frameworks to draw from in making sense of the work they are called upon to evaluate. It also prevents the work from being judged using yardsticks that the authors never intended or with which they are not even familiar. In other words, if an author fails to say clearly that their writing is in the social sciences or the humanities, it is hardly surprising if someone in the natural sciences were to take the author to task for having or not having employed natural science theories and methods or methodologies. Similarly, a sociologist of religion who fails to situate their work clearly within the confines of the discipline of sociology of religion should hardly be surprised if a physical geographer accuses them of not being sufficiently grounded in physical geography. Authors are of course encouraged to, when and where necessary, draw from various disciplinary backgrounds, approaches, or perspectives, provided they do so consciously and are aware of the possible implications on the assessment of their work. In other words, one writes for one's peers or a particular readership. One does not simply write like a fisher-person casting their net and hoping for the best.

Scholars have to be very clear about the argument they want to make and, even more so, why they believe the argument is worth making. It is not because we are researching religion that we should assume we can get away with being dogmatic. Every assertion and every claim we make must be substantiated. From

the outset, one should give an outline of the objectives of the proposed writing, stressing the theoretical/intellectual and practical/applied reasons for thinking the argument worth making, and clearly articulating how one intends to develop one's argument or basic assumptions.

A key dimension of scholarly writing is being able to relate what one writes to the body of literature relevant to the subject matter. One would therefore be able to answer the question of what other research, studies, writings, theories, and conclusions are relevant to one's proposed writing and how one intends to draw from the approaches and results of the works in question to inform and guide one's arguments in the writing. Such review of past and current literature of relevance should not simply be a list or inventory of research articles, reports, and books that the author considers appropriate (although relevant works need to be mentioned). It must lead to extrapolations of principles, concepts, themes, and orientations from these works that can be built into the author's own work and related to their overall theoretical interests, giving direction to their work.

A *critical appraisal* of a piece of research, published or otherwise, calls for:

- a. *Finding out the theoretical assumptions or frameworks under which research was done and how generally familiar the author is with the ongoing theoretical debates.*
- b. *The methodology used by the author to collect their data. How convincing is this? Was this the best possible approach? Could further insight have been gained had they employed another methodology?*
- c. *What is the author's main argument? How original is it? How clearly do they make the argument, and how naturally does it flow from the body of data?*
- d. *What contribution to knowledge does the work make? To what extent does it cover gaps, provide new insights, elucidate existing theories, break new grounds theoretically, etc.? To answer these questions satisfactorily requires deep immersion and familiarity with relevant and related literature.*

To write meaningfully based on research is to demonstrate one's ability to make sense of the data one has collected. In research terminology, this means to analyze or seek to link the research findings to the research questions. It is worth bearing in mind that the answers to the questions should not be unrelated or separate fragments. Each answer should form an integral part of a larger whole—the researcher's overall design—and the researcher should have made sure of this from the outset. Ideally, the answer/data should be capable of being

put together in a pattern within the framework of the design guided by the author's initial research objectives. This might sound too akin to hard sciences for those of us with social sciences and humanities pretensions, but, as I have argued elsewhere, the "methodic process of critical, systematic questioning, meticulous data gathering, analysis and interpretation, and alert receptiveness to the humility of doubt, the force of evidence, and the possibility of error" doesn't have to be confined to the natural or hard sciences.<sup>1</sup>

The analysis is not something that researchers start to think about after collecting their data. The analysis goes hand-in-hand with and stems from the preceding stages. Of course, post-hoc hypotheses, formulations, and analyses, particularly "the analysis of the unexpected," are not ruled out per se and, at times, can be very fruitful. But blind fishing expeditions for data (or groping in the dark without a roadmap or a clear sense of direction in the hope that something useful might turn up) are not encouraged. Moreover, this is not an economical way of proceeding. Time and resources are key in research, writing, and publishing. The research process should be systematic in its steps and considerations. The framework or outline of the analysis should be prepared before the data is collected and this can be done without straitjacketing the operation or stifling imaginative excursions.

Analysis and interpretation go hand in hand. Interpretation entails making sense of or reading meaning into the data a researcher has collected. It invites the researcher to explain (i.e., facilitate understanding of) the phenomenon being investigated. This requires the researcher to link or relate their findings to the hypothesis/basic assumptions and objectives set out at the beginning of the research. To what extent have these been validated? Does this call for a reformulation/ modification of or total break with existing theories? If a new theory is required, how would the researcher go about formulating it? In short, interpretation invites the researcher to link theory to fact and to show how interconnected and important they both are for the advancement of knowledge in their domain of research and scholarship.

Normally, research should yield new knowledge, which should be presented to the wider scholarly community of practice to which one belongs and is sustainably networked. The sharing can take place through multiple forms: research report, thesis, dissertation, film, documentary, public and/or policy discussion, interviews with journalists or peers, exposition/exhibition, blog post, podcast, ethnographic novel, journal paper, book, book chapter, etc. Because those researched often have various and sometimes contradictory viewpoints on issues,

it is important in presenting research findings to give the various social actors a voice in our texts, to quote them word verbatim (i.e., undoctored and unsanitized), sometimes extensively. Sometimes the researcher plays the referee between competing accounts or perspectives on the same issue, thereby bringing a certain hierarchy to bear on various discourses, in an effort to make meaningful their contradictions and incoherencies. In this regard and in the interest of theorization, rich scholarly writing entails an investment in bringing Clifford Geertz's "thick description"<sup>2</sup> into well-articulated and sustained conversation with John Jackson's "thin description,"<sup>3</sup> especially in a world of accelerated mobility of people and social media-driven circulation of cultures.

In most university settings, for students studying for a degree, the presentation of findings often takes the form of a monograph, which is a detailed account of the phenomenon being investigated and an interpretation of the facts to bring out the logics that underpin them. Whether writing a monograph, an article, or a book, writing offers the researcher an opportunity to review their understanding of an area and provides the reader with a guide to measure the researcher's knowledge and competence in that given area. Researchers should therefore use whatever they write as a focus for their reading, and as a device for sorting out their ideas about an issue. Publishers and readers expect a well-structured piece of writing, showing a critical awareness of the relevant literature, and an ability to summon arguments and evidence relevant to the subject matter. Scholarly writing demands a sustained presence of mind and generosity in drawing on and acknowledging the contributions of others to the subject matter.

In writing, a researcher must avoid making assertions without necessary evidence or arguments to support them. Publishers and readers are interested in the author's views and opinions, only to the extent that their writing is able to demonstrate how they arrived at them. It is easier to make a statement than to support it. In scholarly writing, one is expected to support statements, not simply to make them. Authors are expected to acknowledge by properly referencing all quotations or allusions to other people's work and even one's own work. It is a strength to write with the hope of reaching beyond one's echo chambers. However, within and beyond one's echo chambers, belief and trust are likely to stand in the way of truth, especially when the truth is critical of or counter to conventional wisdom and practice.

## WHY THE PREFIX “AFRICAN” IN SCHOLARLY WRITING?

What has Africa got to do with it? Is there anything in scholarly writing that is distinctively African, apart from the aspiration that African scholars who invest in writing with “the accepted template” have to share their work and contribute to global debates? Collectively, Africans are increasing the number of books they publish with established and renowned publishers and the number of articles they publish in top or highly ranked journals from Africa and beyond. These efforts improve the visibility of knowledge produced in Africa as a geographical location in an otherwise standardized, homogenized, routinized, and predictable global marketplace of scholarship. Isn't it enough to simply publish according to internationally established and globally shared standards of excellence in scholarship? What is it about an African scholar, beyond the imperative to publish, that should compel or urge them to write? And does that call for more than just generalities and the technicalities of writing? Put differently, what matters more: content or technique? Message or messenger? Or is it a question of seeking a careful balance between the two? What would an African balance between content and technique, message and messenger, look like? And what changes to publications policies and practices would that necessitate?

Although scholarly writing is part of a globally shared repertoire of scholarship, it is understood that context shapes scholarship and the perspectives of scholars. This should caution against a propensity to settle for scholarship by analogy or mimicry. Such scholarship, like racism in the following statement by Toni Morrison, can be a distraction:

*“The very serious function of racism ... is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and so you spend 20 years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says that you have no art so you dredge that up. Somebody says that you have no kingdoms and so you dredge that up. None of that is necessary.” (“A Humanist View,” a 1975 speech Morrison gave at Portland State University)<sup>4</sup>*

Knowledge production and scholarly publishing are steeped in political and cultural considerations and influenced by hierarchies of being and becoming, which shape and color perceptions and relationships. This poses a challenge of how to navigate the politics of knowledge production and dissemination informed by unequal encounters, unequal relationships, and competing traditions of knowing and meaning-making. Concepts, methods, and debates

must not be rushed into a universal currency or canon in the heterogeneous global knowledge market or community before they have been tested and scrutinized in different geographies and by people of different racial, ethnic, cultural, class, gender, sexual, and generational identities. For Africa, this means that knowledge is shallow if the process fails to include relevant sensitivities, sensibilities, perspectives, and scholars who claim or are claimed by Africa on the continent and beyond.

This consideration was at the heart of the creation of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) 49 years ago, in 1973. The creation of CODESRIA was also partly motivated by a perceived need for greater recognition and representation of what African social scientists had to offer in debates where they were often reduced to passive observers whose role was to implement and not to think. The high rejection rate for African scholarship in Northern journals meant that African scholars essentially had to choose between bending over backward to accommodate debates in colonial languages, whose origins and assumptions differed from the burning questions and concerns of their continent, or create and sustain alternative outlets for their research informed by greater relevance in theory and practice the diverse expectations and aspirations of Africans.

The situation was compounded by the fact that African scholars tended to operate in linguistic silos and echo chambers determined by the colonial languages (English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, and German) they had inherited and the fact that what existed as scholarship in one of the languages was hardly available in translation in the others. This alarming incongruence between experience and mode of representation begs ongoing inquiry and contemplation because, alas, the asymmetries that CODESRIA was meant to address remain largely in place, despite its formidable efforts to make a difference. Providing for strong publications and dissemination in its programs was a clear indication that the founders of CODESRIA as a pan-African organization opted for significant independence of thought and scholarship—even if these continued to be articulated in colonial languages and dependent on donor (largely western) funding<sup>5</sup>—as well as critical engagement with Africa on the continent and in the diaspora.

CODESRIA has, over the past 49 years, established itself as a leading scholarly publisher in the social sciences and humanities on the African continent, with 90 percent of what it publishes correlating to the research and activities it sponsors among various research networks in universities and research institutes throughout the continent and, increasingly, in the diaspora. Since 2000,

CODESRIA has regularly published—in collaboration with scholarly professional associations in most cases—six bilingual (usually in French and English with the occasional article in Portuguese) and a few multilingual journals. In many regards, CODESRIA has been a lone voice in making a case for the African value-add in scholarly publishing and in resisting takeover and commercialization by Western publishing. Universities, research institutes, and other professional scholarly associations on the continent are only too willing to hand over publication and control of their journals to the Western publishing entrepreneurs fishing for profits.

I worked with CODESRIA from 2003 to 2009 as its head of publications and dissemination. There I came to understand how easily one could publish in and on Africa and perish. This was not only vis-à-vis the external world where it is more fashionable to write and read about Africa through Western prisms and from non-African sources. It was also, more painfully, a regular experience that many scholars on the continent applying to participate in CODESRIA activities (conferences, workshops, seminars, methodology, and themed institutes) seldom engaged and referenced CODESRIA publications. This was the case despite the dedicated efforts of CODICE, the CODESRIA documentation service, to source and make documentary resources available to its membership. The reason for this was not only the inaccessibility of CODESRIA publications in many parts of the continent because of distribution challenges. It was also because scholars in Africa learn and become adept at playing the game of hierarchy of credibility informed by where one is published, with Western publishers and publications almost a priori given preferential positionings higher up the hierarchy, if not quite simply at the apex. African publishers, CODESRIA included, are defined by African scholars seeking local and international visibility and credentialism as local by default, while publishers outside of the continent, especially when located in the West, stand a very good chance to be defined as international, and therefore as more prestigious and high impact. It doesn't seem to matter that African nation-states otherwise tend to rigidly police their borders against the flexible mobility of Africans in an effort to contain what they term "international migration." Pan-Africanism, it would appear, is at best opportunistic and selective. As chair of Langaa Research and Publications in Cameroon, a country with no active university press, I often receive feedback from local professors who acknowledge the quality of publications by Langaa but who lament the fact that the publisher's address is in "little known Bamenda." "If only Langaa could acquire an American address" (even if by identifying a co-publisher there), I am sometimes told, "Langaa would be the place to publish."

It doesn't seem to matter that with improved distribution of scholarly content by African publishers thanks to technological developments in digital publishing and dissemination (such as Print-on-Demand and e-books) and to distribution initiatives championed by distributors such as African Books Collective (ABC), African publishers have become more competitive and their content more accessible and discoverable on distribution platforms and vendors such as Project MUSE, JSTOR, ProQuest and ESBCO<sup>6</sup>, as well as on Goodreads, Amazon, and Google.

African Books Collective is an "African-owned, worldwide marketing and distribution outlet" for books from Africa. Over 100 publishers in over 20 countries across Africa participate in the collective. They share a common ethos of publishing from within African cultures and asserting Africa's voice in Africa and internationally. Participating publishers focus on scholarly and literary works including some children's books and comprise research institutes, university presses, commercial presses, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and writers' organizations. The collective is owned by its founder publishers, who elect a five-member Council of Management that meets annually. The Council is responsible "for setting the collective's strategy and for its representation in the wider book and publishing world." ABC "seeks to be profit-making on behalf of its publishers and is non-profit making on its own behalf." The ABC website lists its top titles in 2020 (from Tanzania, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Cameroon, and Rwanda). In 2022, the ABC was distributing over 3000 books. Beyond the initial surprise it provokes, the location of ABC in Oxford is evidence of Africa's reality as a dancing masquerade with which we must keep pace to be best situated to depict its creative nimble-footedness and encounters.

A growing number of Northern audiences whose attention we crave in our scholarly endeavors, increasingly aware of the gaps produced by previous systems and enduring hierarchies, seem to be supportive of helping to fill them by encouraging the dissemination and consumption of African scholarship published by African publishers.

"International publishers" are understood by African scholars and university bureaucracies to be publishers situated outside of the continent. They credit such publishers with rigorous peer review mechanisms, professional standards, and a capacity to attract greater visibility for their publications than any African publisher can. This occurs even when the scholars in question are on the editorial boards and active as peer reviewers for the African publishers they disparage. By extension, they disparage their own institutions based in Africa. Disparaging African publishers simply because they are in Africa extends to disparaging

African research institutions and universities themselves because they are based on the continent of Africa. This amounts to rituals of self-flagellation. Interestingly, having studied rituals of flagellation among the so-called “primitive” societies for centuries, some scholars have become so fond of self-flagellation that they adore everything foreign or “international” and intensely hate everything about themselves. This brings to mind the story of a Cameroonian patient at a hospital, who vigorously protested when the doctor suggested administering a “local anesthesia,” insisting that she wanted absolutely nothing short of an “imported anesthesia.”

There are, increasingly, Africans committed to publishing in Africa. The dominant situation, however, is one in which, if and when African scholars approach African publishers with submissions, these are likely to be manuscripts that have been rejected by their international publishers of preference. In some instances, the affliction to “whiten up” is so acute that they would rather publish with vanity presses and predatory publishers outside of the continent and thus international in their estimation than publish with a remotely reputable publisher on the continent. The impact of new information and communication technologies on the global availability and accessibility of publications by African scholarly outlets does not appear to affect this attitude in any significant way. A consequence of such a situation is that the quality of a book or an article no longer depends on its contents and what peer reviewers as critical consumers have to say, but rather on its publishers and what university promotion committees attribute as “international” and “local” publishers. It is all too common, in many a country, for established professors to delay the academic progress of younger colleagues because the latter have published locally. Hardly is the focus primarily on the content of what has been published and seldom is the development of next-generation scholars appreciated.

Sometimes a publisher in Europe and North America loses its visibility and status in the eyes of African scholars for no other reason but the fact that it is owned and operated by a member of the African diaspora. It would appear, thus, that our quarrel is much more with ourselves, and the excruciating self-doubt that inhabits us, than with publishers and their professionalism as such. Reading for knowledge and substance has easily been replaced by guesswork and the art of keeping up appearances. This is not to deny that, even in the West, the systems for evaluating publications score journal articles in area studies lower than articles published in journals that are known to be at the cutting edge of the disciplines, just as articles published in non-English language outlets get lower scores than English language outlets.

In terms of the decolonization imperative, it appears that, even as African scholars are critical of knowledge produced in accordance with Eurocentric canons and epistemic values, they are ready to absolve Western publishers and their editorial processes, as long as they are accorded visibility and credibility, even if not on their terms as decolonial scholars. Beyond symbolic deconstruction and critique of the politics of knowledge, decolonization, and transformation, it would appear such actions are seldom about rupture or making good bedfellows of one's rhetoric and actions. They are about creating space for a complementary politics of inclusion within the prevailing framework, templates and standards of visibility, legitimation, and credentialism. African scholars who critically question the status quo are summarily condemned as "disruptive" by academic gendarmes (high priests or gatekeepers) anxious to police the status quo. If our aim is to reconcile scholarly excellence with relevance to the African context, we can hardly content ourselves with merely aspiring to increase the number of articles and books we publish in top or highly ranked "international" journals and with top international publishers. We ought to be driven preponderantly by an understanding in relation to Africa that not all that counts can be counted and not all that can be counted counts. We must make our scholarship count for the valorization of Africa beyond tokenism. This, of course, should not amount to sacrificing excellence for relevance, and quality for mediocrity.

We can't simply lend ourselves as tools in the production of knowledge that is all about downplaying, disparaging, or demeaning the familiar and the local and celebrating the unfamiliar, especially when one has been schooled to internalize and reproduce Europe and its global ambitions of dominance through the dedicated pursuit of whitening up. In such a process, not much thought is given to the fact that being local or international is not confined to any particular location but is always a function of position and perspective vis-à-vis the reality at hand. To a child born and brought up in Oxford or Cambridge for example, Oxford and Cambridge university presses are first and foremost local publishers before being international, thanks to the colonial and imperial logics that sought to impress upon the rest of the world that the British were the world's finest race and God's best gift to humankind. Self-belief and a solid sense of self-worth would go a long way in disabusing ourselves of the obsession with whitening up. What if Africans were to rethink and revalorize our creative endeavors? For more on this subject, you might want to read two articles of mine, published in 2004 and 2012 respectively.<sup>8</sup>

## DANCING THE DANCE OF OTHERS AND RELATED METAPHORS

As a child, I was fed many a story of my grandmother by those who knew her well. One of the stories that has stuck with me is the story of her as a consummate dancer without a dance of her own. At social gatherings, she spent her time impersonating others and imitating the way they danced. Often it was to ridicule the way others danced, but sometimes it was in approval. The result was that a party or event would start and end without others getting to know and appreciate what exactly, beyond imitating or mimicking others, was my grandmother's personal dance style. The lady who told this story, a contemporary of my grandmother, said she died without anyone ever knowing her dance. She had lived her life as a perfect copier and an astute performer of the art of others. She had earned distinction, the way an actor would do in Hollywood and be rewarded with an Oscars, by playing others. This is not to say playing others is not a worthwhile pursuit, especially if one does it as convincingly as did my grandmother. Not everyone has to be a scriptwriter. And, in any case, who says scriptwriting or original designer of something is better than the imitator? Sometimes the imitator does it better than the original designer.

In terms of the theme of our workshop, my grandmother was like a writer who was outstanding at literature reviews and did not share a story of her own to add value to such overviews of the creative outputs of others. A good literature review is one tailored to drive a research question or curiosity in a given area of interest to the researcher in question. Perhaps my grandmother's ambition was merely to entertain herself and those around her with the dances of others, to the point of losing herself wholly into them. In this respect, she could strike some as a dancer with so much to display but so little to hang onto. Her art of dancing could be likened to the salespersonship of someone with little knowledge or more than an ephemeral experience of what they are trying to persuade others to buy.

Some could argue that, as far as dancing was concerned, my grandmother never went beyond the stage of mimicry or hapless reproduction of others, even when she appeared to make fun of them. To be fair to her, she wasn't there to explain her motives when this story was told, so we can only guess what light she might have shed on the situation. Was my grandmother around to explain herself, she could perhaps have said that her desire was nothing more than to study, carefully, objectively, the dance styles of others, and never to reveal herself. Such a response would translate to what passes for a value-free science that appeals to the researcher to keep their subjectivities in check.

Scholarly writing is also about the making and remaking of intellectual and academic traditions. We should thus engage scholars of Africa in intellectual intergenerational biographical conversations while they are still alive, so they can justify their actions if need be. This is something I have encouraged as chair of the Langaa Research and publishing group, which has its home in Cameroon. As the next generation of African scholars, if you come across a book or an article on Africa that leaves you with more questions than answers, do not hesitate to find the contact details of the author and address your concerns to them, in the interest of promoting the cross-boundary conversations that we need.

Why we study and write about particular contexts should dictate what and how we study and write about those contexts. If our business is to decolonize or contribute to the engineering of social change and provide for the silences in the dances of the world, then we need to go behind the stage of the dances and dancers featured in public arenas and other places and spaces of visibility, almost as if they were the canon.

We need to focus on bringing Africanness to the attention of those who have been repeatedly served the dances of others, as if they had no dance of their own or as if their dances do not qualify to be the object of appreciation. As Chinua Achebe would put it, we should proceed in a manner that recognizes and provides for the lion—as hunted or as hunter—telling its own story, in its own voice and style, and not necessarily in the zero-sum manner of the hunter in his quest for recognition and celebration among his trophy-hunter folk. The Africans we research and write about should be able to read and approve our accounts of them because we have resisted the temptation to caricature their predicaments in the interest of the monolithic pretensions of the ivory towers we are systematically invited to in the name of scholarship.

To those of us overly eager to proliferate the world with our monologues and single stories, it is worth reminding ourselves that, to quote Okot p'Bitek on the Acholi, “every individual is an artist,” even if “some are greater than others.”<sup>9</sup> There is no such thing as the perfect artist whom others should feel honored to copy uncritically. Using the wisdom of proverbs, Chinua Achebe urges us as knowledge producers in a world of colonial prescriptiveness to bear in mind that “every community has enough firewood in its own forests for all the cooking it needs to do,”<sup>10</sup> and that “no man should enter his house through another man’s gate.”<sup>11</sup> The historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo echoes the sentiment by reminding us of the indignity of sleeping on someone else’s mat. To graduate or break free of Eurocentrism and the uneasy comfort of sleeping on “the mat of others” (la

natte des autres), Ki-Zerbo calls on Africans to invest in self-knowledge and in scholarship informed by African experiences and perspectives.<sup>12</sup> To NoViolet Bulawayo, just as imagination is at the heart of freedom—“We have to insist on imagining the worlds that we want to see”—so too is what and who we write about a deliberate choice. For her, the choice is to write about those at the margins, who are in jeopardy of being sidestepped and rendered voiceless and invisible by poverty and the impunities of the powerful.<sup>13</sup>

As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie puts it in her caution against “the danger of a single story,” it is from reading Chinua Achebe’s books, that “I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature.”<sup>14</sup> And she went on to bring to life relatable people like her in her writing. Her short story, “The Headstrong Historian”<sup>15</sup> is an excellent example of the nuanced multivocality needed in representing the complexity of identities forged from the navigation and negotiation of myriad encounters by Africans in and out of the continent. Writers and artists, it would appear, have a thing or two to share with scholars and academics on how to go about the business of valorizing African experiences and dynamism with required complexity and nuance.

## **WRITING AFRICA AND AFRICANS AS A CONTINENT AND PEOPLE IN MOTION**

How we research and write about Africa and Africans must reflect the reality of a continent and people on the move within and beyond the confines of geography. Everything moves—people, things, and ideas—in predictable and unpredictable ways. It should not surprise us that Africa moves and has always moved. If the deep historical conviction that Africa is the cradle of humankind holds, then everyone, regardless of their present location in the world, is African, or, at the very least, once was African.

The circulation of things, ideas, and people is not the monopoly of any group, community, society, or category of human. Mobility and circulation lead to encounters of various forms, encounters that define and redefine in myriad ways. If Africans, their belongings, and their ideas circulate, it follows that their identities, personal or collective, move as well. They move, among other things, through the stories they tell and the representations we as scholars make of them in what we research, write, and publish.

Through encounters with others, mobile Africans are constantly navigating, negotiating, accommodating, or rejecting difference (in things, ideas, practices, and relations) in an open-ended manner that makes them permanent works in progress. Put differently, and seen through the prism of histories of mobility, identities (even when claimed exclusively and in the singular) are always composite and open-ended. No mobility or interaction, whether horizontal, vertical, or circular in nature, leaves anyone, anything, or any idea indifferent, even if it does not always result in immediate or tangible change.

As researchers of Africa and Africans on the move, we would agree that no encounter results in uncontested domination or total passivity. Some people may wilt in the face of domination, some resist it fervently, and others navigate and negotiate the tensions and contradictions brought about by the reality of domination in complex, creative, and innovative ways. Such creative and oftentimes circuitous navigation may hold potential for new and more convivial forms of identity, practice, and relating. If our scholarship is sensitive to and provides for such mobilities, it is well-placed to develop innovative conceptual and methodological tools to enhance understandings of the nuanced complexities that being and becoming African in motion engenders.

## **A SCHOLARSHIP OF COMPOSITENESS AND CONVIVIALITY**

In one of his proverbs, Chinua Achebe likens the world to a dancing masquerade, adding that if one wants to see it well, one can ill-afford to stand in one place. In other words, one cannot do justice to a fast-moving subject matter by staying glued to the same conceptual, methodological, and analytical preconceptions, routinizations, and predictabilities. Granted that Africa and Africans are permanently on the move, let me adopt and adapt Achebe's proverb to read: "Africa is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place." This speaks of Africans as well: "Africans are like masks dancing. If you want to see them well you do not stand in one place." Nimble-footed realities require nimble-minded intellects and nimble-minded scholarship. Nimble-minded intellects need to bring historical ethnography into conversation with the ethnographic present. They need to draw on and distill from yesterday and today to inform a far-from-linear future. Let's draw on and adapt Achebe yet again: "Disciplines and scholarship are like masks dancing. If you want to see them well you do not stand in one place." The sort of scholarship this awareness of the universality of incompleteness and of mobility calls for is a scholarship of compositeness and conviviality.

Recognizing interconnections and interdependence and promoting collaboration enriches scholarship. For the researcher, this means co-elaboration, co-investigation, co-production, and co-provision for the compositeness of being that acknowledges the outsider within and the insider without as intimate strangers. Convivial scholarship requires making a deliberate effort to reach in, identify, contemplate, understand, embrace, and become intimate with the stranger within us, in individuals, societies, disciplines, and fields of study alike. Such recognition of incompleteness and provision for the cross-fertilization of ideas through mobility and encounters should be within and between disciplines, and between researchers/scholars/academics and those outside the academy whose lived realities inform or ought to inform knowledge production and consumption.

As researchers in and of Africa and Africans in their mobilities, we have the audacity and power to challenge and rethink knowledge production. We can promote and demand the imperatives of seeing, hearing, feeling, touching, and smelling the world from different angles, different vantage points, different backgrounds, different orientations, different perspectives, and different interests, as suggested by Chinua Achebe in his proverb about the dancing mask. Such conviviality in our scholarship should accommodate the likes of my grandmother who excelled at the dances of others, while simultaneously challenging members of her community to reactivate and bring into conversation their own distinctive creativity and innovation in dance. Imagine knowledge production as truly participatory, a process in which no race, gender, culture, ethnic or age group, geography, or any other social category has a monopoly.

Truly convivial scholarship does not seek, the way conventional debates on Africa and the disciplines from the vantage point of the powerful have, to define and confine by ignoring the facts, massaging them, or outrightly dictating what the facts should be. Rather than describing and limiting Africans in relation to territories, geographies, racial and ethnic categories, classes, genders, generations, religions, colonial linguistic spheres, or whatever other identity marker is in vogue, convivial scholarship should provide for the compositeness of being and becoming African as a permanent work in progress. If the call for conviviality, inclusion, multi-layeredness, and compositeness of being and relating is to be more than just a free for all, everything goes, hotchpotch of views and perspectives, convivial scholarship must challenge the academy to embrace and use the same critical consciousness that supposedly engendered the disciplines, their canons and their logics of practice, in contesting and transcending unproductive fixations with disciplinary boundaries and credos. Convivial scholarship confronts and humbles the challenge of over-prescription, over-standardization, and over-prediction—in

short, it seeks to undo the McDonaldization of the disciplines and the compulsion for African scholars to whiten up through a scholarship of mimicry and analogy.

Convivial scholarship disrupts and subverts standardized and routinized reproduction of disciplinary structures of power and privilege, structures that scare away humility, curiosity, reflection, open-mindedness, and creative renewal. It advocates the combination of disciplinary depth and sharpness with open-minded critical consciousness and inclusivity in approach. It is critical and evidence-based, without limiting evidence to sensory perception or a fixation with predictability, generalizations, and teleology. Rather, it seeks to reconcile predictability with interpretability and is critical about sources and McDonaldized ideas of evidence. It is a scholarship that sees the human in the natural and the super-sensory, the local in the global and the global in the local. It provides for the dancer in the dance and the dance in the dancer.

Convivial scholarship brings seeming disparities into informed conversations, which do not ignore the hierarchies and power relations at play at both micro and macro levels of being and becoming. Rather, it draws attention to the histories and sociologies of violence and violation that create illusions of supremacy and zero-sum ambitions of conquest. Convivial scholarship challenges us—however grounded we may be in our disciplines and their logics of practice—to cultivate the disposition to be present and to be present everywhere at the same time, through others and by means of technologies of self-extension.

The capacity for presence in simultaneous multiplicities is attainable and sharpened through a recognition of and provision for compositeness of being. It is also sharpened by the capacity of disciplinary practitioners to accommodate disciplinary outsiders as a way of affording disciplinary insiders the opportunity to spread their wings and renew their canons. Convivial scholarship cautions disciplines, their borders, and gatekeepers to open up and creatively embrace difference and dynamism. It insists on an openness to the sensitivities and sensibilities that our compositeness of being imbues in us as students of society, such that we can do justice to the subjectivities of the composite “others” whose sociality we seek to understand and represent in our scholarship. With convivial scholarship, there are no final answers. Only permanent questions and ever exciting new angles of questioning. Such scholarship is predicated upon recognizing and providing for incompleteness as a necessary attribute of being, from persons to disciplines and traditions of knowing and knowledge making.

I challenge us all, as scholars of Africa and Africans in motion, to research and write Africa and Africans through the prism of convivial scholarship.

## NOTES

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5. Some could argue that such dependence on funding by western donors, however justified, stood in contradiction to CODESRIA's decolonization project and the pursuit of Pan-Africanism and intellectual freedom.
6. See "University press selection of e-book vendors for US academic libraries: Why work with X but not Y?" by Mei Zhang (2022), *Learned Publishing*, <http://doi:10.1002/leap.1447>, on how these "big four" vendors of scholarly content by university presses dominate the e-book market globally. Also see: [www.statista.com/statistics/715001/preferred-e-book-vendors-at-academic-libraries-in-us](http://www.statista.com/statistics/715001/preferred-e-book-vendors-at-academic-libraries-in-us).
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