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# ORAL SOCIETIES AND COLONIAL EXPERIENCES: SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA AND THE *de facto* POWER OF THE WRITTEN WORD

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## INTRODUCTION

Pre-colonial traditional societies in Sub-Saharan Africa were mostly oral societies whose languages were not written. That despite Africa itself being one of the first places where written characters were used for communication. The first African art of writing came with the introduction of the hieroglyphics alphabet and structure of writing in ancient Egypt in about 3000 B.C. The only form of writing that may have preceded the Egyptian invention was the Mesopotamian cuneiform which was developed in about 3500 B.C. Following from these, as Ong (1985, p. 85) pointed out, were the Indus Valley script of 3000-2400 B.C., the Chinese script of 1500 B.C., and the Mayan script of AD 50. Hieroglyphics as a new method of communication was a system of writing that was mainly in pictorial characters; and it was sometimes called the picture script of ancient Egyptian priesthood.

The major breakthrough in transforming the spoken word into something that was legible took place (gradually and in a phasic form), according to Ong (1985, p. 84), "when a coded system of visible marks was invented whereby a writer could determine the exact words that the reader would generate from the text." Generally, the argument that the invention of writing represented the contextual validity of history may be a misplaced one, for the so-called pre-history (before written history) was, in effect, full of lively, loud, and original oral history. Even Ferdinand de Saussure, the so-called father of modern linguistics, acknowledged the primacy of oral speech (original and more representative of the physics as well as the consciousness of the primordial source). Hence, writing, in effect, became a kind of compliment to orality and not necessarily its transformer (Ong, 1985).

In the course of human history, though, and especially with selective marginalization of the colonized populations who have been discursively

and analytically deployed as the “Other,” i.e., those who are not from the West, and who are, by extension, deficient in manners, values, culture, education, and development (Said, 1978, 1993), oral traditions, which mostly characterized these societies, were also relegated to historical non-significance. In addition, the tradition itself was used as an important pretext for the project of colonization, for lack of written languages intentionally served as one important reason of civilizing the backward areas of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and other locations of the same genre.

In the African context, especially, it was clear that the mostly oral traditions of these societies’ languages were neither being appreciated nor promoted as media of communication, or means of education by the invading Europeans. For one colonialist historian, for example, these education systems and languages were not fit for human development (Pells, 1970). More problematically, African oral literatures were not accepted as genuine and valid forms of social, cultural, political, legal, and economic expression. As such, for the European powers that were in control of African life in the colonial relationships, only written literature (in colonial languages) was to be regarded as meaningful literature. As Ngugi wa Thiongo (1998, p. 108) observed,

[It is the fact than otherwise] that the privileging of the written over the oral had roots in the relationship of power in society and history... The dominant social forces had become identified with the civilized and the written. With colonization, the same binary opposition was exported to Africa, with the written and civilized being identified with Europe as a whole, the oral, and the a historical being identified with Africa. The product of the oral no longer belonged to history because quite clearly, the colonizer did not want the colonized to have any claims to any history as the basis of his resistance and affirmation of his humanity.

In such contexts and realities, when Pells (1970), for example, talked about what he called “high culture” which he associates with European ways of living, Behr (1971) also expressed how European education was to elevate Africans to a social plateau where they can aspire for that high culture. In essence, this is again equating the written word with education, learning, and the potential for civilization, and the affirmation of the ahistorical particularity of the native-cum-just discovered tribes of the wild. This is so for Behr, who was writing on the situation of colonial South Africa, and was actually counter-posing the lack of written scripture of the San and Khoikhoi peoples of the South African peninsula against his own Dutch background.

## THE CONSTITUTION OF ORAL TRADITIONS: COMPLEX, MULTICENTRIC, AND RICH

Contrary to Behr's (1971) position on this matter, others have observed that unwritten languages used by traditional, oral societies have valid and time-tested values for learning about, and managing community affairs as well as sanctioning unwanted practices, responsibly exploiting environmental resources, and even creating specialized literary sub-cultures within one main culture. As Andrzejewski (1985, p. 31) pointed out, "there is mounting evidence that the presence of literature is a universal characteristic of human society; [that is that] literature is an art which uses language as its medium irrespective of whether it is oral or written." Testimony to this observation is the fact that in so many oral societies in Africa, poetry and the power of poets as political power brokers was an ordinary fact of life. While poetry may have been regarded as verbally the most organized and, therefore, the most socially elevated medium of communication in oral societies, there was also the omnipresence as well as the importance of the method of narrative, storytelling, and proverbs that were all powerful components of the idea and command transfer formulations and implementations in these societies. Ong (1985, p. 140) said that "although it is found in all cultures, narrative is certainly more widely functional in primary oral cultures than in others... Most, if not all, oral cultures generate quite substantial narratives or a series of narratives." In storytelling, a widely used method of education in oral societies, famous storytellers are, in many cases, as respected and referred to as poets. In many African societies, as Pellowski (1977, pp. 44-45) said:

There is still a high priority assigned to family storytelling... Children of the Ewe people of Ghana are simply not considered educated unless they have heard many times the *gliwo*, animal stories that intended to teach basic lessons in obedience, kindness, courage, honesty and other virtues through indirect example... Some groups in Africa have special names to describe the storytelling events within the family circle. For the Edo of Benin, Nigeria, such a gathering is called an *ibota*. It includes the children, youth, wives, and the head of household in one compound. It usually takes place in the largest room, and it can celebrate anything from the successful sale of a crop to the visit of a relative, or just being in good mood.

Storytelling may come naturally to some, but in most cases it is a method that is learned. This is essentially so, for in storytelling, especially in oral societies where it is a prominent process of education, the relationship between the speaker and the listener must be permanent, selectively reinforced and continually monitored. As Brown (1995, p. 26) observed, "one of

the sources of risk in communication is that whereas speakers may think that what they have to say is sufficiently important to be paid attention to, listeners (even younger ones) may have other priorities and may not listen in detail but only partially, or perhaps not at all." So what Habermas (1998) called *universal pragmatics* in communication, i.e., a socially inclusive understanding between the speaker and the listener is "technically" essential for the desired outcome in a two-way transfer of information and ideas. The method as well as success in storytelling are, therefore, more complicated and more demanding than simply narrating the myths and actualities of past and present life systems. Important in all storytelling then, is the use of not only the verbal communication, but all other effective forms of pitch, tone, specialized occasional expressions, amusing notes, for-the-moment gestures, and all the repertoire of body language that could fix or at least retain a substantial portion of the listener's attention.

In terms of using generalized or, many times, specialized proverbs not simply as a way of communicating a point or opinion, but as powerful behavior commanding as well as deterring notions of social, political, and even economic relationships in oral societies, the practice is as common, if not more common, as other media of communicative methodology. Again, though, there is always a sense of poetry in formulating and uttering proverbs in, for example, the African context. Ruth Finnegan (1970, p. 395) explained:

In discussing the style and structure of African proverbs, one of the first things one notices is the poetic form in which many are expressed. This, allied to their figurative mode of expression, serves to some degree to set them apart from everyday speech. This point often does not emerge in collections of translated examples... The general truth touched on in a proverb can be conveyed in several ways: more or less literally, through a simile, or (most commonly) through a metaphor.

Citing some examples<sup>1</sup> of proverbs from traditional oral societies in Africa should illustrate the widespread use of proverbs in valuing or de-valuing a situation, behavior, or expectation. On the importance of leadership, the Hausa of northern Nigeria say, "a chief is like a dust heap where everyone comes with his rubbish (complaint) and deposits it." In the Somali context, there is "*nin xil qaaday eed qaad*" (a man who accepts responsibility, i.e., position of leadership, has also accepted to be blamed for almost everything that goes wrong). On the importance of self-help, the Zulu (South Africa) stress, "no fly catches for another." In terms of not coming to terms with your reality vis-a-vis others, the Xhosa and the Zulu (both from South Africa) say, "there is no elephant burdened with its own trunk."

The Somalis have a similar saying that also uses the elephant analogy: “*maroodigu takarta saaran ma’arkee, tan kaluu arkaa*” (the elephant does not see the insect on its body, it, indeed, sees the one on other elephants). This last proverb precisely stands for a sanctioning metaphor with the explicit connotation that you must look at and measure your own fault and shortcomings before you blame others. Again, these proverbs often served as quasi-codified jurisprudence where once the assumed precedents were stated, it was incumbent upon the people to refrain from pursuing issues that were contrary to the expected norm.

These, sometimes, seemingly simple, but occasionally complex, substantive and selectively effective methods of oral communication (the narrative, the storytelling, the proverb) were fully complemented by poetry, which was the most formal and, therefore, the most advanced form (in seriousness of the matter addressed) of expressing an idea, sanctioning a deed, or “authoritatively” predicting a multitude of social/other happenstances. Generally, the poet, whether he writes his poem on a sheet of paper or relates it verbally, could always be transmitting powerful components of literature that were affecting context-based lives of people. On this point, Elizabeth Drew, in her *T.S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry* (1949, p. 61) said:

The poet’s own immediate task is to bring all the depth and intensity of his own consciousness to a verbal surface: the reader starts from the surface, penetrates gradually to the full consciousness beneath. Poetry is thus both act and instrument. It is the poet’s tongue, speaking a language of enticement to his fellow men and urging them, through a sharing of his speech, to share his own aftersight, foresight and insight.

The general maxim that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world was more applicable, I would argue in this instance, to oral societies than traditions with a long history of written languages. As Andrzejewski (1985) related, poetry in oral societies in Africa was used for almost every life purpose and with considerable impact on people’s lived situations. That itself was, *ipso facto*, necessitating the memorization of poems that were composed for different reasons, events, and seasonal occasions. More importantly, poetic competitions and combative utilities of poetic eloquence were also common, and were memorized by specialists whose *devoir actuel* in these non-script relationships, was to memorize these poems, and regularly recite them in order to avoid mixing them with foreign material or forget certain stanzas as time went by. This was also the case in conveying the poem or the narrative to the general or targeted audience. Andrzejewski (1985, p. 36) wrote:

Like the modes of memorization, the channels of dissemination of works of oral literature can vary substantially. In some societies, certain highly esteemed genres of poetry are memorized and then disseminated by professional or semi-professional bards and reciters, while prose narratives and light verse are left to amateurs. In other societies, anyone is entitled to recite any genre he wishes, provided he finds a willing audience.

Generally, as Ong (1985, p. 57) observed, "verbal memory is understandably a valued asset in oral cultures." Obviously that should be the case, for in order to assure the endurance of these historical, life management, and even legal poems, memorizers were usually obliged to transfer their memory knowledge of these poems to younger generations who would memorize and carry them with them into new times of literal oral traditions that were in congruence with life systems in place.

As important in the poems of oral literatures such as the Somalis in East Africa who have been called "a nation of bards" by Sir Richard Burton, the peripatetic English traveler who visited East Africa in late 19th century, is the sanctioning as well as the negotiating and reconciling power (in disputes, conflicts, signing of verbally binding agreements, etc.) of the poetic prose (see Burton, 1966 [1856]). That distinction should not be particular, in the African context, to the Somalis, though, as Pellowski (1977, p. 37) noted, "it is in Africa that one encounters the richest variety of bards for the post-medieval period." In constituting a contextual definition for the term "bard," let me adopt Pellowski's (1977, p. 19) definition where it "will mean a storyteller whose function is to create and/or perform poetic oral narrations that chronicle events or praise the illustrious forbearers and present leaders of tribal, cultural, or national group."

In making the "historic" contact with the Somali nation of bards, Sir Burton wrote a book that was somehow, and with tragic historical and social implications, called *First Footsteps in East Africa*. Apparently this literate European man's footsteps were more meaningful than those of the millions who walked over that land for thousands of years before Sir Burton and who have studied the environment, managed to undertake complex life systems, and survived with dignity, measured pose, and eternally confident outlook.

Overall though, and again from the apparent and ever present freedom of the expressive mode complemented by the absence of any imprisoning editorial complications, the poet appeals to his people using what was culturally treasured more than all else, liberty and land. Moreover, and specifically worth confirming in this regard, is the high probability that in oral societies, because the verbal power is so essential for the formulation

of thoughts, ideas, beliefs as well as the implementation of all agreed upon or situationally ordained tasks, possess a more refined and convincing expressive style that conveys all messages as clear, as strong, as specialized, and as urgent as they should have been.

Addressing some or certain aspects of these important and distinctive features of so-called "primitive" languages, i.e., oral traditions, Sapir (cited in Anderson, 1988, p. 76) pointed out how "many [so-called] primitive languages have a formal richness, a latent luxuriance of expression, that eclipses anything known to the languages of modern civilizations. Popular statements as to the extreme poverty of expression to which primitive languages are doomed to, are, therefore, simply myths." Understanding this last observation should not be that complicated. And the first item for analysis that comes to mind, at least as far as I am concerned, is the unlimited expressive space that oral languages, when used for political objectives, legal arbitration or otherwise, could accord vis-a-vis written languages. As JanMohamed (1983, p. 280) noted, the medium of the written word eventually "destroys the immediacy of personal experience and the deeper socialization of the world, and consequently the totalizing nature of oral cultures."

That is to say, and with bold implications, that because oralities as media of communication and/or expression are so close to the reality of the situation implicated, so original with respect to the speaker's thought processes, so reflective of the communicator's overall consciousness and expectations, and so contextually realizable in the subject's ecology and attendant life systems, they are concretely more real, and above all else, more open-ended in time and space. This is not to be simply based on the fact that all languages are originally/naturally oral, although that is always important. It is true that of the 3,000 or so spoken languages that are in use today, only about 80 have a written script (Ong, 1985). One may not help but wonder that with global political and economic premium placed on written languages, especially the so-called European master languages, what wealth, in expressive styles, historical data, eco-system descriptions, poetic eloquence, unique metaphors and saying and many other "linguistic treasuries" are being missed.

The closed-ended nature of written languages on the other hand, predicts, in fact, achieves a terrain of linguistic interaction that is not only limited and limiting, but also, sometimes, selectively superficial or even outright presumptive, and at worst, pretentious. A very good example of this is how political language, say in the North American context, is purposefully structured for political ends that are frequently justified on an



*ad hoc* basis. Official political language created, structured and written by specialized speech writers, primarily because the electoral, governance, bureaucratic and sector-specific administrative messages it conveys, have become so monotonous, so repetitive, so ideologically stale, so socially sinister, and so situationally mundane that at the end of the day it, in effect, restricts itself. Just think for a moment about how this takes place, and it is not only politicians and political pundits that are contributing to this phenomenon, but also the public. The public, in political debates, in political programs, in political comments, even in the promulgation of political objectives, gets used to, expects, and enthusiastically, even nostalgically responds positively to the “old good ways” of expressing, enticing and yes, even promising the moon and the stars when both speakers (politicians) and listeners (the public) know that the majority of the items, if not the entire barrel of promises, can not be practically delivered. Both, the etymological as well as the expressive *a priori* agreed-upon stalemate is again pertinent and central to the overall situation (Anderson, 1988).

## **COLONIALISM AND THE DEFORMATION OF LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES**

The elegance and the poetic beauty of oral languages, along with everything else that represented the complex beauty of this tradition, were degraded in colonial encounters, with the written word (in the Sub-Saharan African context, English, French, Portuguese, Spanish and German), heaping all that is valued in languages on themselves while in some cases, even forcefully prohibiting the use of local vernaculars. In this case, what colonialists were most acutely missing was a reasoned appreciation of African oral languages not simply as media of communication, but as repositories of culture, history, millennial values, and cherished beliefs as well as contemporary means of managing pre-colonial systems of life and physical eco-systems that, because they were so specific to a given area of location, were fittingly and effectively responding to needs, desires, and expectations that were all contextually induced, locally authenticated, and over time and space, tested, tried, and patently orally “temporalized.” A corresponding point is made by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002, p. 127), when discussing African oral art in their seminal work, *The Empire Writes Back*:

That African cultures had not, ... developed writing beyond the earliest stages by the time of the colonial onslaught should not serve to obscure the fact that African oral art had developed forms at least as highly wrought and varied

as those of European cultures. Recognition of this led critics to urge that the study of these forms should be removed from the limiting anthropological discourse within which they were set and be recovered as a legitimate and distinctive enterprise for literary criticism.

With the establishment of written colonial languages as the master medium of communication in all binding life situations of colonized populations, and the relegation as well as the restriction of oral languages to hardly valued inter-native sounds, wails, and cries as well as a cluster of what was to be, at least civilizationally, incomprehensible nonsensical utterances, speaking, say English or French, became, among the colonized masses, a symbol of status and achievement. As Mazrui and Mazrui (1998) pointed out, the acute marginalization of black people's vernaculars *via* colonial language and linguistic policies and programs has now given us a social and political space where "one out of every five blacks on earth has a European language for a mother tongue" (p. 13). These facts, among many other disruptive projects, were fully realized with the regularization of colonizers as the first class citizens of the colonies. To what extent and with what elegance one spoke the colonial language represented, therefore, an authentic certificate of striving for, and, of course, never arriving at the *rendez-vous* of high culture, social achievement, and finally an assurance that you were not as "savage" as the rest of your brothers/sisters. Even among those natives who were recognized as relatively brilliant and who were sent to the European metropolis for advanced studies, the across-the-board cliché that "although you may have not fulfilled the rigorous academic requirements of the Sorbonne, Cambridge, or Harvard, but at least you are better than your brothers in Africa (read: we will give you the diploma, for your qualifications are good enough for Africa), was a direct result of the distorted language/linguistic, cultural, and, therefore, achievement valuations that were formulated in the colonial relationships.

Becoming culturally close to the colonizing entity, that is after the fact, was so treasured in colonial relationships that Albert Memmi, in his classic *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1991 [1957]) powerfully discussed how in colonial Tunisia, the mantle of French colonizers was the price all the natives were aspiring for. Before he/she reaches (gets) that, though, the Arab had to reach the position of the Tunisian Jew (above the Arab in status, but not, in any way, close to the French). Expectedly, the latter was not in the mood of giving up or even sharing the coveted second class status which was, for the sorrowful psychology of the colonized populations, as far as they could get on the ladder of human considerations. And just to give you a glimpse of how the colonized were culturally and eventually even

physically being quasi-de-humanized, Aime Cesaire (1972, pp. 19-20), in his oft-consulted *Discourse on Colonialism*, noted when he was “talking of societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined.... I am talking about millions of men in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair and behave like flunkeys.”

The millions of men [and women] whose world view and self confidence have been so de-patterned, and who are trembling and behaving like flunkeys were not, of course, always like that. Let me reiterate Cesaire’s point: they have been taught, *perforce*, to be all of these and even more. A case in point that powerfully conveys an opposite experience is how a British colonial agent has described the calm demeanor as well as the unfathomable confidence of a simple Somali man he knew in the early part of the twentieth century who for the former, represented the general manners, ways, and beliefs of the entire community. Gerald Henley (1971, p. 42) wrote:

Like all Somalis, Ahmed had no feeling of inferiority, no complex about being black, no worry about proving anything to the white man. All Somalis stroll up to you to talk. They do not hesitate or straighten themselves, or look haunted by any doubt as they approach a white man. They treat you like a Muslim, a brother. The rest is with you.

Ironically, the most potent media of “de-linguicizing”, de-culturing, and socially dislocating the natives were the colonial systems of education whose most effective weapon was the double-edged sword that at once promoted and implemented the written, colonial language, and literally prohibited the use of most oral vernaculars in all colonial institutions that were, more or less, controlling all aspects of the lives of the indigenous population. In writing on this issue and on his experiences in colonial Kenya, the eminent writer Ngugi wa Thiongo’ (now at New York University), in his book, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993, p. 11) noted:

Our Language gave us a view of the world... Then I went to primary school and the bond was broken. The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture—it was a foreign language of domination, alienation and disenfranchisement. As a practice in colonial Kenya, anyone who was caught speaking the native language in the school vicinity was to be punished.

The underdeveloping and even de-developing effects that these practices could have had on indigenous populations are immense, enduring, and tangible in real human experiences in late 20th century Sub-Saharan

Africa. That fact was not analytically unappreciated by a number of intellectuals from the “native quarters” (Abdi, 2002; Achebe, 2000; Nyerere, 1968; 1970; Rodney, 1982). The loss of culture as a life management centre, the disruption of locally induced, locally produced, and the devaluation, *willy nilly*, of locally maintained systems of ecologically sustainable means of self and community were present and dangerous. These were also, that is before their destruction, at pace with people’s needs as they were also socially responsive to people’s situational expectations. With the essence of African cultures not incorporated into what was called development for colonial and post-colonial Africa, the economic stagnation as well as the institutional ineptness are quite understandable. The United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1994, p. 9) emphasizes the centrality of culture to development in that “Development is a seamless web whose fabric contains a multitude of interwoven strands. It is culture, however, which provides the color, the texture, the weave, the resilience, the strength of that fabric.” In his book, *No Life Without Roots: Culture and Development*, Thierry Verhelst (1990, p. 160) also affirms how development that is not culturally based and/or culturally responsive is not workable:

Only the cultural dimension can give coherence and finality to development.... [Culture] is dynamic in that it evolves through needs, desires, and external contacts. Culture is holistic because it encompasses all aspects of life whether they be material or spiritual, symbolic or technical, economic or social. In short, the cultural approach is synonymous with the human approach in all its complexity and richness.... stressing the cultural dimension of development means placing human beings at the centre of all analyses and initiatives.

The process of de-culturing the natives *via* the relegation of their world as expressed in oral traditions to the lower lines of life, and the elevation of the written European languages to a status where they literally become the *sine qua non* of dignity, authenticity, and development, powerfully unleashed an identity crisis that has overtaken the consciousness of the colonized masses. At the most basic level, identity is understood as who a person is. Identity, therefore, defines a person’s cultural, social, political, and economic being. In his now widely referenced work, “The Politics of Recognition,” Charles Taylor (1994), affirmed how important it is that the person who is being identified be the source of that identity, which, in Taylor’s terms, makes identity authentic. When on the other hand, the person or the group is arbitrarily identified by others, then identity becomes an imputed, unauthentic and, therefore, arbitrarily imposed identity.

In colonial relationships, the process of de-legitimizing the natives’ ways of expression, evaluation and comprehension was a highly produc-

tive and effective mode for mis-identifying the historical and developmental achievements of the colonized. With this, as Walter Rodney, in his magisterial work *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1982) observed, came the disempowerment of the African *persona* and the African community *via* the concoction as well as the full utilization of a cluster of unauthentic and socially (read anthropologically) imposed cultural identities that eventually became responsible for the subsequent marginalization, deprivation and a quasi-permanent case of underdevelopment. When people's identities that were locally generated, and over millennia locally maintained and, where necessary locally modified are suddenly torn asunder, the level of lost confidence that follows is so powerful that the recovery, if ever there will be one, will be slow, situationally fragile, susceptible to trends that could reverse any progress and will, above all else, take so many decades or even centuries more than the time it has taken to destroy the primal self-perceptions. Parallel or perhaps even a part of the cultural and identity crisis included the devaluation of complex systems of indigenous knowledge that traditional societies had tediously and meticulously developed over millennia for almost everything from curing simple leg wounds to forecasting different weather patterns and assigning specific celestial movements for determining maritime travel. Oral traditions were the reservoir that contained, sustained, and provided that immense repertoire of knowledge that was locally produced, managed, and utilized.

### RECASTING THE DEBATE FOR COUNTERHEGEMONIC POSSIBILITIES

Lately there has been "a sort of move" back (mostly by scholars based in Western universities) to re-considering the importance as well as the uses of indigenous ways of observing and knowing. Agrawal (1995, p. 414) noted that the new "focus on indigenous knowledge and production systems heralds a long overdue move, [for] it represents a shift from the pre-occupation with the centralized, technically oriented solutions of the past decades that failed to alter life prospects for the majority of peasants and small farmers in the world." In addition, George Dei (1995) emphasized the importance of the legitimizing indigenous systems of knowledge and ways of knowing so as to disturb the dominance of conventional discourses on development and "progress."

The savage *detournement* of self and conscience (identity), and the concomitant de-emphasizing of the collective ownership as well as the communal values of indigenous knowledges and ways of relating to the world,

should bring us to fully realize that the age of European hegemony, to employ an Abu-Lughodan analogy (Abu-Lughod, 1989), was more negatively impactful in the damage it has implemented in the minds as well as the consciousness of the colonized than in all the massive and irreversible physical destruction it has successfully achieved for the sake of colonizer Europe. Ironically, though, and quite absurdly, it is now the natives, as Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) so pointedly said, who, after all they have been subjected to, have to apologize for their revamped expectations, desires, and even rightful yearning for some kind of re-constitutive psychological redress from the previously colonizing and now dominant zones of the world.

Beyond the identity, knowledge, and cultural dimensions of development, there is also the very important and inalienable concept of time in understanding and achieving human progress. Time is a central, incessantly intervening and essentially perception-governing factor in development. That is, development can not be imposed, despite any good intentions, from outside; it must take place within the consciousness of people, i.e., humans must move forward or even backward “at the right time,” “for the right reasons,” and by rightly understanding the present, the destination, and the consequences. Coloniality imposed perceptions of time and temporal expectations in colonial and post-colonial Africa, all conveyed in the written culture of the metropolis, we are now realizing more than a century after the fact, *n’etaient pas*, has been propagated for so long, *d’or*. Unlike time in the European culture and European worldview, which is practically commodified, time in Africa is always present, abundant, and friendly. As Ong (1985, p. 46) conveyed, “by contrast with societies with written languages, oral societies can be characterized as homeostatic, that is, oral societies live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance.” A convincing observation on the relationship between time and development and, therefore, the essence of development as a temporal perception is made by the late Tanzanian minister and ambassador Amir Jamal (as cited in Mechanik, 1995, pp. 97-98):

Healthy, growing societies are naturally hungry for ideas and information. If the quintessential element in all this pervasive global process—**time**—is taken away from them by compelling them to make instantaneous adjustment to a sustained barrage of influence and values alien to their culture and consciousness, what is now termed fundamentalism will become the inevitable countervailing force, providing a sheltering umbrella for **time** to work for those protesting societies.

Time, in the African perception, and economic development are intricately intertwined. Leistner (1998, p. 36) pointed out how “perceptions of time are a central aspect of traditional African world views and have a significant impact on development efforts... *There is even a time category that is known as No Time where supposedly nothing may happen*” (emphasis mine). Compare this with the colonially introduced notion where “time, all time, is money”—where time is deliberately divided into microseconds, printed as you come to work and as you leave it, where your life is completely governed by omnipresent hours and minutes, with synchronization of time, sounds of time, and so-called, but factually dreary, alarm bells (sounds) of time awakening you, putting you to sleep, and essentially wresting the regulation of your whole existence from you. Time was friendly in oral traditions, time was, indeed, abundant in oral traditions. Then colonial anthropologists came and used time to measure Africans, make false sense of their customs, construed their enduring and eloquent languages as primitive sounds, and recommended, effective as soon as possible, that new time components/zones, new identities, and a new project called development be written for the natives. The latter are still lost in this compartmentalized, alienating, and imposed worldview that has uprooted them from their sure centers and has placed them in a linguistically, culturally, and developmentally bewildering borderland.

In Okot P’Bitek’s classic, *Song of Lawino, song of Ocol* (1984, pp. 68-69), a traditional Acoli woman (northern Uganda) laments how the new time, that is Western time, is wreaking havoc on the existence of her “modernized” and supposedly “enlightened” husband:

Time has become	I do not know
My husband’s master	How to keep the white man’s time
It is my husband’s husband	My mother taught me
My husband runs from place to place	The way of the Acoli
Like a small boy,	...
He rushes without dignity	In the wisdom of the Acoli
	Time is not stupidly split up
And when visitors have arrived	Into seconds and minutes,
My husband’s face darkens,	It does not flow
He never asks you in,	Like beer in a pot
And for greeting	That is sucked until it is finished.
He says	
‘What can I do for you?’	

Looking at these factualities in the recent history of the *de facto* power as well as the constant supremacy of the written word, i.e., colonial languages over indigenous, oral vernaculars and specialized prose style, and

the concomitant cultural domination, identity deformation and stunted development possibilities that followed, new thinking in restoring some of the lost luster and life of the oral tradition may be urgently needed. This is necessary even after one realizes that the Sub-Saharan Africa of today is fully incorporated into a global capitalist system that uses the written word for everything. In today's Sub-Saharan Africa, therefore, it is the written word that is respected, promoted, and desired, and it is colonial languages that are the undisputed master languages. Even previously oral but currently written so-called local languages are still relegated to the relatively negligible status of limited usage in some elementary schooling cases and few other, non-specialized and selectively "villagized" administrative tasks.

Even such prominent writers as Ngugi wa Thiongo who at one point decided to "shelve" writing in English, and has, instead, adopted the Kikuyu script for his writings, had to temporarily de-emphasize that program. Ngugi wa Thiongo now mostly publishes in English. The reasons are multitude and multifaceted, and I am not going to delineate them here. Suffice it to state that with the cultural and psychological damages already done, the small literate corps in *neo*-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa are neither that willing nor even that competent (more importantly, not patient enough to "lower the quality of their reading") to read, analyze, and articulate in the native language which is not exclusive and which is spoken by the uneducated, unsophisticated, and unknown rural, urban lower classes. Ngugi wa Thiongo is probably one of the few exceptions in this regard, for he clearly sees and affirms (see his *Decolonising the Mind*, 1986) how the communicative as well the psychological aspects of language are culturally based. Hence, and in wa Thiongian terms (as in Ngugi wa Thiongo), the importance of maintaining and nurturing the threads that connect culture to language and vice versa. However, and to put it bluntly, mastering English or other European languages is an achievement that current inhabitants of "native land" are distinctively and conspicuously displaying. A telling observation in this regard comes from Mazrui and Mazrui (1998, p. 69):

Africa is an acute case of linguistic dependence. Credentials for ruling an African country are disproportionately based on a command of a Euro-imperial language. In Africa South of the Sahara it has become almost impossible to become a member of parliament or president without being fluent in at least one of the relevant European languages.

But colonial languages, no matter how physically close we come to them, are still not our languages; it is the language of others, language imposed on us, and that does not represent our world. It was Fanon who



said that “a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language” (1967, p. 18). Moreover, and again on the case of language-subject relationship and, therefore, language/literature ownership, Abdi (1998, p. 254) wrote:

And to the general question of whether a language belongs to all who use it, the answer, from my perspective, is a categorical NO. A Language, be it English, Kiswahili or Burmese has a history, it has also its value systems, moral sanctions, inherent emotional expressions, and special sentimental attachments. These all create a specialized and un-severable relationship between a language and the person who is native to that language.

With that situationally formalized, let me pragmatically add that we cannot easily, and for even tangibly expensive reasons, disengage from English altogether. Hence, the parallel and confessedly strong argument that dominant written languages, now most conspicuously represented by English, have not only rendered oral traditions almost obsolete in all globally significant international relations but are now even presenting themselves as the common linguistic property of all humanity. Ashcroft et al. (2002) seem to think so by (a) indicating that the process of literary decolonization is complete, and (b) by assuming that the post-colonial space has not only subverted dominant European discourses, it has also appropriated them. These serious post-the-fact writers may have a point, but, I am sure, only to an extent. On the literary decolonization point, I will agree more with Chinua Achebe (2000) who is still waiting for this to start in earnest and on the appropriation point, it may actually be more a situation where the dominance of English in our world today, for instance, is because it does not accord any other choice but to embrace it in order to address immediate survival intentions.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I am hopeful that the multiple ideas and analysis I have deployed here will lead to more stimulating pointers and exchanges where the debate on the literature and the contained life systems of traditional oralities vis-à-vis the now globally powerful written languages continues. To reiterate the current realities, though, and regardless of the changes that have taken place, the dominance of the written word in its itemizable or master narrative forms will continue for the foreseeable future. One other thing that will seemingly be with us for a while is a Sub-Saharan African context that continues to be plagued by problems of cultural alienation, identity crisis, and underdevelopment. According to most *Human Develop-*

*ment Reports* (HDRs) produced by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the overwhelming majority of the countries that score the lowest in the Human Development Index (HDI) are from Sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, as was explained in the 2003 HDR (UNDP, 2003), the situation of most of these countries has been getting worse since 1990. The point here is not to “radically and irrationally” (as some otherwise informed people might interpret from my arguments) blame the historical and current impositions of European languages and cultures for everything that is wrong with the old continent. It is simply to suggest that if the language of development, the standards of development, the history of development as well as the social-psychology of development are all imported via the expressive and descriptive platforms that are both ontologically and existentially alienating, the results cannot bode well for Africans and others in similar intersections of historiographies and their actualities.

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## NOTE

<sup>1</sup>The only-in-English proverbs cited are mentioned in Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970), in the chapter on proverbs, pp. 389-425. The rest (i.e., those translated from the Somali) are ones I am personally familiar with from the Somali culture, and I am literally or figuratively translating them.