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# The African Renaissance and the Quest for Epistemic Liberation

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## **Abstract**

The idea of an African renaissance as a quest for the rebirth and regeneration of Africa provides an opportunity to think differently about Africa, particularly in the context of its varied and unrelenting challenges. The rebirth and renewal of Africa cannot be achieved overnight as a miracle but only through a series of appropriately calculated processes of rehabilitating Africa on many fronts, including knowledge generation and its articulation. This article, which focuses on the question of knowledge, argues that the African renaissance depends in part on the ability of Africa to reconstitute itself as a legitimate centre of knowing. We argue that revisiting indigenous languages as instruments for generating modern knowledge is one contending locus out of which the drive for an African renaissance can be championed because, as the saying goes, 'knowledge is power'. An African renaissance - as a project which seeks to reconnect the African knowing subject to Africa's epistemological traditions - remains important for postcolonial Africa.

## **Introduction**

In his essay entitled *Formulating modern thought in African languages: Some theoretical reflections*, Wiredu (1996) concluded the discussion with the following submission: "conceptually speaking, the maxim of the moment should be 'African, know thyself'" (p. 104). This article adopts this maxim as a rallying cry for the need to strengthen knowledge generation in Africa, and to foreground our argument for an African renaissance. This article argues that the African renaissance depends in part on the ability of Africans to reconstitute the continent as a legitimate centre of knowing. The question of an African renaissance is an issue about which much has been said (see Eisei 2001; Okumu 2002; Cheru, 2002) but the subject continues to seize us partly because of its ideological significance to postcolonial Africa, and also because the African renaissance is an ideal yet to be realised.

The seeds of the idea of an African renaissance were sown in what Ngugi wa Thiongo (2012) has called “the African idea” (p. 1520); that is, that form of consciousness which helped organise Africans across the continent in their fight for independence—Pan-Africanism. The African renaissance as a quest for the rebirth and regeneration of Africa is, in part, an effort at (re)membering Africa. (Re)membering Africa, a term employed by Ngugi, involves a process that attempts to reverse or undo the dismembering Africa suffered as a result of the slave trade, partition, colonisation, and the subordination of its peoples. In general terms, to remember is to place a part of the past in the service of the conceptions and needs of the present. The processes of (re)membering Africa can assume various modes and forms, which in their diversity constitute the essence of an African renaissance. The African renaissance as a vision attempts to realise the economic, political, cultural and epistemic rehabilitation of Africa.

This article is limited to examining the question of the critical reappropriation of knowledge and how it can assist Africa’s renaissance. It regard the reappropriation of indigenous knowledge(s) as an active process that involves the assimilation and transformation/adaptation of ideas from the African past to its present context. This critical reappropriation has to be understood within the context of a modernity which has, to a large extent, fashioned the social, political, economic, cultural and epistemic terrain in Africa into what it is today. The rehabilitation of memory and the restoration of its intellectual heritage are crucial in the process of ‘(re)membering Africa,’ - which attempts to render Africa vital once again and transform it into a significant player in the global imagination. As Mignolo (2012) argued, memories are the foundation of political visions and decisions, they are a way of being in the world, of building, maintaining, transmitting and consolidating the identity that imperial histories taught colonised peoples to despise.

Without memory there can be no African renaissance. Any quest to revitalise the past in the sense of ‘tradition remembered’ places its trust in memory. However, we should not be oblivious to the contested and problematic nature of memory. In his paper, Eller (1997) reminds us that “memory is porous and productive, and the past is elusive, especially but not exclusively when the past was a preliterate period...[t]he porosity of memory allows elements to slip out and to slip in, rendering the firmest memories contestable” (para. 47). Entailed in this is that whatever has been retained through memory is not ‘pure’, since memory has the tendency to select not only what to retain or discard but also, more significantly, to ‘invent’—hence its characterisation as both

'porous and productive'. Even entire nations, like individuals, constitute and reconstitute themselves through the constant editing and reediting of memory (Brink, 1998). As Eller (1997) argued "whatever is remembered of the past is interpreted, infused with meaning, and this meaning may not have been part of the experience of events at the time of their occurrence" (para. 70). More importantly "groups may manufacture (out of the disparate pieces and scraps of history and culture or out of thin air) and disseminate a past which is partly or wholly fallacious but which is thereby no less powerful or effective" (para. 70). This is true of many historical accounts of Africa, both pre-colonial and postcolonial, where 'patriotic' history has been constantly engineered and deployed for political ends. For this reason the remembered past should always be treated with a degree of circumspection.

This work examines the African renaissance project within the context of reclaiming African epistemic historicity by arguing for the need to make indigenous knowledge(s) part of the continuous and living memory of its peoples and, in the process, re-inscribe Africa and its forms of knowing into the ongoing global conversations on knowledge. This is not an attempt to return to the past, but to re-inscribe the past in the present towards the future (Mignolo, 2011). We are convinced that the assumption of 'the psychic unity of mankind'—a 19th century label that is quaint but still in use—which claims that all human groups are truly human in their thinking apparatuses, and therefore broadly similar in their ability to invent and innovate (Blaut, 1993), has credence although seemingly ignored by those who believe that there is only one centre for knowledge generation, creativity and innovation. History informs us that not so long ago—that is before western imperialism and the colonisation of other continents—the world order was polycentric, boasting of different centres of knowledge each suited to the needs of their respective communities (Mignolo 2011). This article argues that an African renaissance, as that project which seeks to reconnect the African knowing subject to Africa's own epistemological traditions, remains important for postcolonial Africa, as it holds the promise not only for African epistemic liberation but also for addressing existential challenges facing postcolonial Africa in general.

### **African Renaissance**

The term renaissance derives from the Latin term *renascere*, meaning to "be born again, rise, reappear, [to] be renewed" (Online Etymology Dictionary). In its original European conception, the term

renaissance had its origins in the economic, political and cultural rebirth of Europe between the 14th and 17th centuries (Tikly, 2003). This was a period in European history characterised by a great resurgence in the domains of literature, art, science, and commerce. In Africa, the idea of an African renaissance is historically associated with the political discourse of the colonial period and visions of the future of Africa in the aftermath of colonialism. The adoption of the term 'renaissance' by Africans testifies to the similarities that Africans see between the rise of Europe after the Dark Ages and what Africans envisage for the continent after the 'dark age' of colonial rule.

However, questions have been raised about the appropriateness of borrowing a European concept to define an important movement heralding Africa's regeneration. The time for an African renaissance may have arrived but the analytical concepts to describe such a key historical process must originate from Africa. Ramose (2000) is of the view that by adopting the term 'renaissance' a concept historically linked to the west, we invariably deny Africa the right to select a key concept from within its own experiences to understand and interpret its own history and politics. A true African renaissance should therefore begin with a linguistic inventory to locate suitable indigenous concepts to capture the regeneration of Africa. Decrying the seeming readiness to appropriate western concepts to describe this key African movement, Ramose (2000) asked: "Is there something unnatural about the natural environment of Africa such that the history of Africa cannot be described and defined by concepts originating from Africa?" (p. 49). Ramose is convinced that "the African experience can be and should be the primary source from which to draw concepts to understand and interpret its politics, history, and philosophy" (p. 53). From a similar angle, but without dismissing the idea of borrowing concepts, van Niekerk (1999) alludes to the fact that questions could be raised about "the irony of utilising ... a European concept for an event that would hopefully express the coming to fruition of Africanness" (p. 66). For van Niekerk, if it can be accepted that the renaissance was the historical process out of which modern European culture and identity were fashioned, then Africa's adoption of the term 'renaissance' would probably demonstrate the irredeemable dependency of African thinking on the west. This is because a renaissance for Africa should mark the beginning of the process to reignite Africa's belief in itself. It is therefore important for Africans to realise that by continuing to borrow from and imitate the west in even those aspects that ought to define their

vision of the future as a free people they are surreptitiously surrendering to European tutelage.

While the point being made above is crucial in terms of urging Africans to reassert their ontological standing as competent beings capable of originating ideas and concepts that capture African reality, it is at the same time important to remember that the deployment of European concepts in pursuit of the African cause is not something new (see Tikly, 2003). As van Niekerk (1999) correctly argued, the attempt to draw a cleavage between what is from the west and what is African only plays into the hands of those who instituted the false dichotomy of 'tradition versus modernity,' which in essence is an obfuscation of reality. Without in any way justifying mimetic philo-praxis, it can be said that Africans have made use of western philosophical theories such as Marxism, liberalism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism to articulate the African condition and to further their liberation agenda, with considerable success. It is perhaps true that the antidote lies in the poison (Serequeberhan, 1994).

Putting aside questions about the European origin of the concept of 'renaissance', we realise that ideas about the regeneration, renewal, reawakening, rebirth and resurrection of Africa have a long history in Africa, with luminaries such as Seme (1906), Diop (1946 et al.), Nkrumah (1964), Mandela (1994, 1998) and Mbeki (1996) coming to mind. Prah (2001) confirms that:

the idea of an African renewal ...has actively guided Africans in the emancipation process since the mid-nineteenth century. In its many and differing choice of words and semantics, it has attempted to define the direction Africa and Africans have to take to see the continent and its peoples from colonial thralldom to a new order in which, social, cultural and economic prosperity would be established, as achiev[able] goals, in the organisation of society (p. 186).

Hence every so often African leaders and thinkers in history have attempted to articulate and reaffirm the future of an Africa emerging as a world player, revived and reinvigorated to give new life to the continent and its inhabitants. Throughout its history, the discourse on African renaissance has hinged on a new beginning for Africa, and for the continent's modern cruel history to pause and change course (Zezeza, 2009). This new beginning has to take root in the various

heritages that come together in Africa—a heritage described by Mazrui (1986) as Africa's 'triple heritage,' combining the indigenous African, Euro-Christian/western and Islamic civilisations. The promise of an African renaissance must be realised within the context of this triple heritage.

We shall not rehearse arguments that have been put forward for and against an African renaissance, save to indicate that two broad views can be identified; that is, Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism. The Afro-pessimists dismiss the possibility of an African renaissance for basically two reasons. First, they point out, of course with plenty of empirical examples, that since independence Africans have demonstrated to the rest of the world how difficult it is for them to govern themselves and manage their economies, creating no doubt that there can ever be any bright future for the continent (see Chabal, 2001). Second, the Afro-pessimists' scepticism stems from their assertion that the quest for an African renaissance is misplaced, simply because there is no glorious past for Africa to salvage. To the pessimists, the call for a renaissance in Africa is a ruse propagated by politicians in order to avoid dealing with critical issues of the here and now, and to divert people's attention away from holding them accountable. In other words, the whole debate about the possibility of an African renaissance is simply a waste of energy, time and resources because such a project is unattainable and illusory (see Boloka, 1999). Afro-optimists, on the other hand, see the renaissance as a possibility as long as appropriate internal and external concessions including good governance, cooperation based on mutual trust and respect for the rights of persons are made in the politics, cultures and economies of Africa and in its relations with the world (see Ramose, 2000; Okumu, 2002; Cheru, 2002). Those optimistic about the regeneration of Africa base their views on an eclectic patchwork of philosophies, such as Africanisation, globalism and decolonial thinking. The present analysis inclines more towards the decolonial perspective.

Decolonial theorising views 'coloniality' as a fundamental problem in the modern world in the sense that, despite independence, there is still a skewed relationship between the 'centre' and the 'periphery' which originates in the colonial period. Coloniality is a condition that outlasts decolonisation and refers to the long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism and that continue to be maintained in so many aspects of our modern experience including economics, politics, culture and knowledge (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). As modern subjects, Maldonado-Torres (2007) suggests that we breathe coloniality all the time. Mignolo (2011) defines decoloniality as long-term

processes involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power which should ultimately create conditions for a new humanity to emerge. It captures both the “analytic task of unveiling the logic of coloniality and the prospective task of contributing to build a world in which many worlds can coexist” (Mignolo, 2011, p. 54). The main argument is that there are still in existence conditions that warrant a new coming together of Africans in order to realise Africa’s true liberation and for it to become a significant player on the world platform. In fact, a renaissance is still warranted because the conditions that prompted the rise of Pan-Africanism in the 18th and 19th centuries have not disappeared completely, but persist under new and disguised labels (More, 2002), anchored by the same logic of coloniality. The poverty, inequality, sexism, discrimination and other dehumanising experiences that gave rise to rallying calls for independence are still part of what defines Africa, and this can be blamed on both poor leadership in Africa and the global colonial matrix of power. These problems require a new galvanising vision and dream capable of invoking the same passion and solidarity that united Africans against colonialism. As indicated, Africa can only realise and reawaken its potential when enough energy is directed at confronting issues of internal governance as well as addressing the effects of the colonial matrix of power at the global level.

The colonial matrix of power, a focus for those who advocate decolonial thinking, is described by Mignolo (2011) as “that complex conceptual structure that guide[s] actions in the domain of economy (exploitation of labour and appropriation of land and natural resources), authority (government, military forces), gender/sexuality, and knowledge/subjectivity” (p. 142). It is within the context of coloniality, both as a condition of African existence and an extension of the colonial hold beyond decolonisation, that the significance of a renaissance for Africa must be understood. In historical terms, the African renaissance can be seen as an attempt by Africa to come to terms with itself and its past within the context of a colonial modernity that has always sought to cast Africa as the opposite ‘other’. The focus should be on how the dream for a glorious future can be transformed into reality and constitute an effective organising philosophy capable of translating passion into action. As correctly pointed out by Lissouba (1995 cited in Legum, 2000):

the idea of Africa in charge of its own destiny—on an equal footing with the rest of the world and making its

contribution to the reconstruction of a world civilisation— can only be based on great passion. Passion is what provides the energy needed for an idea to take shape (p. 67).

Legum (2000) reminds us of how “the Encyclopaedists who shaped the French revolution, dreamt of the ‘equality of man’ and their natural born rights at a time when feudal Europe was ruled by despotic kings and a selfish aristocratic class” (p. 67). Today what they dreamt of is what the modern generation regards as the defining character and nature of western society, but at the point of their dream many would have dismissed those views as wild or unrealisable. The same holds true for the dream of the African renaissance, and it is precisely for this reason that Africa should not be afraid to dream. Nothing should stop Africans from dreaming about the end of coloniality, or the end of the current era of despotism, poverty, ethnic wars, gender discrimination and all of the other ills bedevilling its societies. A dream to see all these ills replaced by economic prosperity, good governance and rights for all including women, children, and minorities is therefore understandable for Africa.

As we gaze toward the future, it is important to remember that the dream for an African renaissance, like all other rallying philosophies and ideologies that have transformed societies throughout history, could also profit from galvanising positive memories of Africa and its civilisations, including some that others may dismiss as mythical or exaggerated. In his discussion on the place of memory in history, Mazrui (2000) touches on a fundamental aspect of how memories are created or invented in history, including nationalistic memories. According to Mazrui (2000), it is true that “European imperialism in Africa played havoc with African memory—initiating new forms of amnesia, nostalgia and false memories” (p. 89). However, out of this process emerged a false but positive memory responsible for the birth of Pan-Africanism. In the words of Mazrui (2000), “Pan-Africanism was born out of the false memory of a pre-colonial united Africa, divided by imperialism. This Pan-African false memory is positive. Within it there may lie the seeds of Africa’s economic and political salvation” (p. 97). On the basis of this Pan-African spirit, despite being based on myths and falsehoods, the continent has built organisations such as the African Union which operate on the assumed oneness of Africa. In the same way that identities are known to flourish despite their roots in myths and falsehoods (Appiah, 1992), we see no reason why rallying calls for an African renaissance cannot also feed on the so-called faulty ideology of

*romantic gloriana*- a memory of Africa that glorifies African achievements and contributions to human civilisation. Utopian dreams can be the cause of positive action. Legum (2000) again reminds us that only those who are unfamiliar with political history scoff at romanticism, because those who don't dare to dream have no glimpse of what the future holds.

If the current world order has been in place since the 1500s, then probably, by this measure of time, Africa should not be judged harshly for remaining hopeful about a possible renaissance given that the last country to attain independence from colonial rule on the continent has only experienced about twenty years of that freedom. There is no doubt that with growing global interconnectedness, including knowledge and technology transfer, and with proper and committed leadership, Africa could make significant strides in countermanding coloniality and reaffirming its place in the world. But as Prah (2001) rightfully noted, these modern developments need to be anchored on a base that accords specific respect to Africa's historical and cultural roots. Development must be informed by Africa's 'triple heritage' where the modern/western operates in tandem with the indigenous and Islamic traditions.

### **The Myth of Emptiness**

Contemporary Africa is incomprehensible if one does not understand the complex, complementary, and combative histories of colonialism and nationalism (Zeleza, 2009). One philosophical aspect that we choose to look at from Africa's colonial past is the myth of emptiness. We argue that the quest for a renaissance in Africa requires us to take seriously the continued effects of the historic "myth of emptiness" (Blaut, 1993, p. 15) upon which the colonisation of Africans and other indigenous peoples across the world was premised. According to Blaut (1993) the 'myth of emptiness' served as the pretext for the whole colonial project. From the proposition of emptiness a series of claims were made: (i) a non-European region is empty or nearly empty of people so settlement by Europeans does not displace any native peoples; (ii) the region is empty of settled population: the inhabitants are mobile, nomadic, wanderers (hence European settlement violates no political sovereignty, since wanderers make no claim to territory); and (iii) the cultures of this region do not possess an understanding of private property; that is, the region is empty of property rights and claims (hence colonial occupiers can freely give land to settlers since no-one owns it). Finally, and most importantly, was the positing of an

emptiness of intellectual creativity, commonly referred to as the absence of rationality (Blaut, 1993). These excuses, which constituted the basis of title to territory and the subsequent alienation of others from their land and resources, remain thorny issues in postcolonial states like Africa's where questions continue to be raised as to whether a renaissance can be achieved without first dealing with the adverse effects wrought by the 'myth of emptiness,' like redistributing land to the majority indigenous peoples dispossessed in the process of colonial conquest. It is for this reason that those who argue for historical justice dismiss as window dressing any talk of an African renaissance that elides the revisiting of historical injustices. The land reform program in Zimbabwe, for example, continues to polarise opinion, particularly between those who theorise about politics and the economy from a modern liberal capitalist perspective, and those who advocate a re-reading through decolonial perspectives and whose analysis proceeds from a vision of life and society based on the cessation of coloniality. The myth of emptiness has had long-lasting effects on Africa. Much still needs to be done to redress the injustices that ensued from the myth of emptiness and also as a way of correcting the perceived distortions on the story of human civilisations.

In the domain of knowledge, the myth of emptiness was in part buttressed by the scriptocentric fallacy, a position that sees writing as the norm and equates the absence of writing with illiteracy or ignorance. According to Miller (1990) the term illiteracy imposes a negative judgement and prevents one from thinking, in positive or at least neutral terms of orality; that is, the non-literate verbal arts and forms of expression that sustained cultures for centuries before modern forms of writing came along. Kadiatu (1998) also observed that "the diagnosis of illiteracy upon another society points directly towards a 'scriptocentric' worldview which marks a state of 'orality' as a state of nature" (p. 19). The ascription of illiteracy was often politically motivated, as it located those communities designated as such as occupying a blank and negative space outside history. It was appropriate and politically expedient for the anthropologist as a colonial accomplice to postulate the absence of 'text' in traditional Africa. In this way the absence of text became indicative of the absence of self-consciousness or even of self-knowledge, which the ethnographer was then able to create and donate to the subjects of his or her analysis (Kadiatu, 1998). This was indeed part of the larger conspiracy to exclude Africans and other indigenous peoples from full recognition and confine them to what Grosfoguel

(2012) has called the zone of non-being. Only those people in the zone of being have their humanity socially recognised.

The scriptocentric fallacy is also challenged by Ngugi wa Thiongo's (2013) analysis of the relationship between the tongue and the pen, in which he stresses the primacy of the spoken word by asserting "the pen imitates the tongue... [t]he pen is clerk to the tongue... [i]t draws pictures of the spoken... [t]he pen speaks the already spoken" (p. 159). For Ngugi wa Thiongo, if we are to develop knowledge, philosophy and all the other arts in Africa then we have to listen to the African tongues and what they are saying. Our intention here is not to undermine the importance of writing or to overlook the important role it has played in the preservation of ideas but simply to draw attention to the fact that the attribution of illiteracy to indigenous peoples was a process that was not innocent of politics. In order to achieve an African renaissance the war must be waged on many fronts, including through challenging such myths.

### **'African Know Thyself'**

The injunction which serves as our subheading, while borrowed from Wiredu, is apparently a derivation of the famous saying 'know thyself' attributed to Socrates, although those like George James, who have engaged in projects of African historical reconstruction, have openly contested that attribution. For George James (1954) 'know thyself' was a common inscription on Egyptian mystery temples addressed to neophytes. Our aim is not to rekindle debate on this controversial subject but to highlight the philosophical context of the subheading we selected. The injunction 'African know thyself' is for us crucial for two reasons. First, it defines in a fundamental way the urgent need for an African renaissance as that programme the realisation of which affords Africans an opportunity to reconnect with their memories and/or intellectual history. Second, and equally important, the phrase is a call to Africans in various spheres of the academy to revitalise African modes of knowledge production on the continent. It is not only a call for epistemic reawakening but a desire to see the African knowing subject reconnect with African epistemology. Of course the second is related to the first in that by strengthening African epistemologies Africa's intellectual history is affirmed. Commenting on the status of indigenous knowledge(s) in contemporary society, Hountondji (2002a) makes the following crucial observation. According to Hountondji, "indigenous knowledge has not entirely disappeared from collective memory... [i]t has not lost any parcel of its age-old efficiency either" (p. 24). The term

indigenous, like its synonyms local, native and original, is “an ecodeterminant used to define the origin of items or persons in relation to how their belonging to a place is to be temporally characterised, especially in comparison to other contenders in claiming belonging” (Masolo, 2003, p. 243). Thus we use the term indigenous to emphasise the fact that these forms of knowledge have their origins in traditional Africa and may include knowledge(s) relating to the axiology, ontology, metaphysics and practise of such things as medicine and agriculture. An African renaissance in the area of knowledge is therefore possible if dialogue and mutual synthesis can take place between the indigenous and western traditions of knowing under some form of transcontinental epistemic dialogue.

In his article entitled *Ancestors and archaeology in Africa*, Schmidt (2010) makes a fundamental point concerning how those living in Africa today should relate to the historical past. For us, indigenous knowledge and its place in present-day Africa can be analogised to the relationship between the living and their ancestors. In the same way that present generations are biologically connected or indebted to their ancestors, modern knowledge in Africa today remains vacuous without the recognition of a similar indebtedness or connection to indigenous knowledge as the DNA from which it has taken its form and identity. Highlighting the importance of our past (herein referred to as ‘ancestors’) Schmidt (2010) declares that “we are dependent upon the ancestors and ... ancestors are active agents in our lives and other lives... [t]hey are us; they passed on their DNA, our characters, and our deep-time cultural history; they are forever our teachers... [w]e can either incorporate the ancestors or we can continue to erase the spiritual world from archaeology [in this case indigenous knowledge], proclaiming that science has all the answers and that the future has no past” (p. 62). In epistemic terms, there is no question that if we as Africans discard that which is from our past, our intellectual history, we have discarded the DNA that makes our knowledge African going forward, and hence we have lost who we are and cannot therefore know ourselves. Kaphagawani and Malherbe (2002 argued, and rightfully so:

although epistemology as the study of knowledge is universal, the ways of acquiring knowledge vary according to the socio-cultural contexts within which knowledge claims are formulated and articulated. It is from such considerations that one can sensibly talk of an African

articulation and formulation of knowledge, and hence of an African epistemology (p. 220).

In contemporary Africa, as a result of reasons related to our history, the DNA that affords African knowledge its identity is slowly being lost. This is the reason why the critical reappropriation of Africa's knowledge traditions is important for the African renaissance project. For the African to 'know thyself' there is need to strengthen efforts that can reconnect Africans to their indigenous knowledge traditions and transform that knowledge to constitute part of the modern knowledge complex. There is no way one can leave an African imprint on modern knowledge without taking seriously knowledge traditions and modes of articulation inherited from the past which, as Hountondji (2002a) correctly noted, are still available but remain relegated to the private realm as informal knowledge, outside the official knowledge sector.

### **Indigenous knowledge and languages**

Before 1500 the world order was polycentric and non-capitalist. After 1500 the world order entered into a process in which polycentrism began to be displaced by an emerging monocentric civilisation (Mignolo, 2011, p. 28).

The monocentric civilisation referred to by Mignolo is western civilisation, which is coterminous with modernity. The historical allusion above is important in that it gives us a sense of what the world order was like prior to the planetary whirlwind of change that installed the west as the only centre around which everything should revolve. The call for an African renaissance, if understood within this framework, is in part a quest for the restoration of parity of recognition of the civilisations of the world. To dream of such a world is indeed not only appropriate but desirable for Africa because it appears to be the only world in which true humanity can be realised. As we reflect on issues of knowledge, we derive solace from the fact that, despite years of marginalisation and neglect, indigenous knowledge still exists; although it does so in the informal as opposed to the formal sector of knowledge. It exists in the margins and shadows of, predominantly western, modern scientific knowledge.

Hountondji (2002a) succinctly captures the prevailing knowledge situation in most of Africa in the following statement:

[w]hat we witness today is a situation where indigenous knowledge is marginalized. In the best cases, it goes its own way, side by side with the new knowledge system, in a relationship of mute juxtaposition and mutual ignorance, exclusive of all dialogue and exchange (p. 24).

The question that immediately arises is: how can this problem of ‘mute juxtaposition’, ‘mutual ignorance’ and ‘lack of dialogue or exchange’ between knowledge traditions be resolved? Our answer lies in the critical reappropriation of indigenous knowledges and their integration into modern forms of knowledge. Reappropriation of indigenous knowledge entails engaging in a systematic process of sifting from the past those practical, theoretical and normative frameworks and ideas that can provide solutions to challenges of the present. As Hountondji (2002b,) has argued, reappropriation does not seek to replace or do away with western forms of knowing, nor is it some kind of imprisonment in the particular, it is simply an attempt to utilise our African ancestral heritage and the creativity, adaptability and ability to innovate that made our ancestors what they were. The intellectual heritage of the past still has to be subjected to the necessary processes of critical assessment, testing and updating, such that our knowledge can answer to our present needs and requirements.

For Hountondji (2002a), “we must find ways to reformulate traditional knowledge in terms of imported knowledge and, vice versa, we must integrate the traditional into the modern in a way that allows the development of new forms of rationality, enlarged and more comprehensive than the forms prevailing” (p. 37). But in order for that reappropriation to commence there is a need to change our attitudes towards the African past in several respects (Prah, 2001). This is where the question of African languages and their place in knowledge generation and dissemination becomes important. Of course we are warned by linguists that the subject of African languages is contested terrain that requires careful manoeuvring. In a sense what we call African languages, in the way they appear in written discourse today, are actually ‘inventions’ thrust upon indigenous peoples by missionaries and colonials (Makoni, 1998; Prah 2001). Prah (2001) like Makoni (1998) confirms that “the linguistic landscape of contemporary Africa is complicated by the fact that, many African speech-forms and dialects have been rendered into writing by rival missionary groups which [have] elevated some small dialects to the status of full-blown languages” (p. 189). As a consequence, Makoni (1998) argued that

“discourses about the promotion of African languages are likely to be received with scepticism unless standardised written forms can be recast through a process of active and egalitarian reinvention” (p. 244). The two linguists agree on the need to reinvent African languages so that they are divested of their evangelical and political imprint or distortion. Brutt-Griffler (2002) reports of a case from colonial Rhodesia where, after enlisting the services of the renowned linguist Clement Doke to create a standard grammar from the different language groups, “the most difficult question the committee faced was what to call this new language it had created or more accurately, cobbled together. It arrived at the conclusion that the only possible name for the language was Shona” (p. 83). This was the invention of Shona language and, by extension, Shona identity because, as Ranger (1985) pointed out, “before 1890 no-one called themselves ‘Shona’ at all” (p. 4).

Although the missionaries and colonials did not do a proper job and should rightfully be criticised for ‘inventing’ African languages, it would be naive to deny the fact that missionaries have left us a heritage, albeit imperfect, which can serve as a foundation upon which African language experts can improve the writing and use of African languages. The story of African languages appears to be similar to that of African philosophy. African philosophers will undoubtedly remember how the much deplored text *Bantu Philosophy* by Placide Tempels has inspired and continues to inspire the debate and growth of African philosophy. Acknowledging this, Masolo (1994) wrote “the honor of having brought the first piece of literature concerning ‘Bantu (or African) philosophy’ into academic philosophical discussion is attributed to Father Placide Frans Tempels” (p. 46). Even those African philosophers who have vehemently rejected this book cannot deny its influence on their philosophising, and the same could be said about the ‘invented’ African languages. Fortunately efforts are already underway to undo the colonial linguistic mess through “systematic orthographic engineering” (Prah, 2001, p. 189) in order to deliver a ‘disinvented’ version of our languages. However, until such time as a reinvention/disinvention of African languages has been successfully completed (the outcome of which may equally be contested as another ‘invention’, this time by the African elite), African languages in their current mode can still be used for pragmatic purposes. We argue that by promoting African languages in the academy, knowledge generation and ownership can be enhanced.

The centrality of language in knowledge acquisition and generation is a point that Brock-Utne (2001) argues forcefully in her work—with the telling title *Education for all- in whose language?*—in which she

surveys and highlights the pitfalls of most language policies in education across postcolonial Africa. For Brock-Utne (2001) even the concept 'education for all,' a much sought after ideal in postcolonial Africa, becomes a completely empty concept if the linguistic environment of the basic learners is not taken into account. The reality is that without restoring African languages to their rightful place in the academy there is no attaining 'education for all,' and without 'education for all' there is, by extension, no African renaissance. There is no need to emphasise that foreign languages constitute barriers to the attainment of knowledge by the majority in Africa. If Africa is to transform itself from a consumer to a generator of knowledge then strengthening its indigenous languages is not negotiable. In order to confront the effects of the 'myth of emptiness,' and revitalise knowledge generation in Africa, indigenous languages must drive the policy of 'education for all' in Africa. Of course this will not be easy because the question of language is always linked to issues of politics and power. As Brock-Utne (2001) points out, the choice of a language of instruction in Africa is a choice that may redistribute power not only at the global level but also locally between the elites and the masses. Educating people through their own language makes knowledge accessible and translates in reality to 'power to the people,' a feat that a good number of those in power in Africa cannot tolerate. It is equally imperative that, due to the challenge of marketing books produced in indigenous languages and the subsequent effect on publishers' bottom lines, African governments cannot rely on private publishers in this regard but should take a conscious decision themselves to provide funding for such programmes in the same way they allocate budgetary support to other sectors for national development. However, the problem as already alluded is that, some of these governments are unwilling to see ordinary people getting empowered since their political survival hinges on maintaining an ignorant and gullible majority. Our hope on this front lies in the promise of good governance and democratic transitions which, given the desire for change sweeping across the continent and our growing global interconnectedness, cannot elude Africa forever.

In much of postcolonial Africa, governments could do well to take a leaf from early Christian missionary initiatives operating under the so-called civilising mission in Africa. The point of interest here for the purposes of our argument is how the adoption of African languages as instruments for proselytisation effectively altered the metaphysical landscape in Africa. By translating the Christian Bible into various vernaculars spoken by indigenous peoples, missionaries were able to

render the foreign Christian religion part of African life. To this day it is not uncommon to hear African elders claim unequivocally that “in our tradition we are Christians and we live by the teachings of ‘our Bible’”. As Brand, (2011) confirmed, “contrary to the possible intentions of some Western missionaries, the use of African languages in the evangelisation of Africa transferred the initiative to African converts, who could take possession of the Christian tradition in ways never envisaged by the original messengers” (p. 180). In other words, it was because of the effort paid to the local languages by astute missionaries of yesteryear when delivering their teachings that today many Africans are able to claim ownership of Christianity with no hesitation. If this practice was to be extended to other fields such as science, then it is possible to envisage a future in which Africans can come to ‘own’ modern scientific knowledge in much the same way. Revitalising African languages will undoubtedly champion the return of the knowing subject, in the process laying the foundation for a true African renaissance. There is no doubt that an African renaissance ought to accord primacy to the African experience, while at the same time opening up alternative modes of comprehending reality consistent with the diversity that characterises humanity. This, if extended to all cultures, will ultimately lead to the emergence and subsequent growth of a polycentric global epistemology.

Polycentrism rejects the model where the world has a “permanent centre and a permanent periphery, an inside and an outside, where the inside leads and innovates while the outside lags and imitates” (Blaut, 1993, p. 14). According to Mignolo (2011) “[w]estern civilisation emerged not just as another civilisation in the planetary concert, but as the civilisation destined to lead and save the rest of the world from the Devil, from barbarism and primitivism, from underdevelopment, from despotism, and to turn unhappiness into happiness for all and forever” (p. 29). There is no doubt that this civilisation has transformed lives in a manner never seen before, but it has failed to deliver ‘happiness for all and forever’. Polycentrism imagines a future in which knowledge(s) can coexist, without presuming that there is a single and best way for all humans to live or know nature (Maffie, 2009). The rebirth of Africa will happen at that point where Africa is able to produce knowledge and reconstitute itself as a centre alongside other centres of knowledge. In epistemic terms, the use of African languages to transform the African knowledge landscape is a real possibility. Epistemic liberation can constitute the foundation out of which a fully-fledged African

renaissance can ensue because, as the popular adage goes, 'knowledge is power'.

### **Conclusion**

Although the idea of an African renaissance raises mixed feelings in many minds, the reality of an Africa still in crisis despite sitting on some of the richest resources in the world renders the thought of such a rebirth highly desirable. In this work we argued for epistemic liberation as the foundation from which to champion a renaissance for Africa. To 'know thyself' Africans have to reconnect with their memories and they need their African languages through which the DNA of indigenous knowledge(s) can be preserved, strengthened, and disseminated. The idea is for Africa to actively engage in a systematic process of sifting from the past those practical, theoretical and normative frameworks and ideas that can provide solutions to challenges of the present and to use African languages as vehicles for the transmission of modern knowledge.

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