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Session 3

African Languages and African Studies

– Theories, Debates and Controversies

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African Critical Language & Literary Studies: Contributions to African Studies

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Abstract

Several leading African literary and critical language theorists have contributed quite significantly to the discourse and praxis of African Studies from the mid-1900s to the present. Some such scholars include Ngugi wa Thiong'o on decolonising the mind, and the critique of colonial linguistic encirclement; Chinewizu on decolonising the language of African literature; Amos Tutuola on ontologies of incompleteness; Chinua Achebe on the pitfalls of the colonial condition; Ali Mazrui on the micro-linguistics of identity and linguistic diversity in a polycentric world; Kwesi Kwaa Prah, Neville Alexander and Jacob Mfaniselwa Nhlapo on pan-African identities through orthographic harmonisation; and Sinfree Makoni on the disinvention and reconstitution of African languages. Notwithstanding the advances that this body of work on linguistic, cultural, and literary imperatives brings to bear on African Studies, the scholarship remains least acknowledged or appreciated in mainstream debates and conversations. The goal of this roundtable is four-fold: (a) reviving and reanimating discussions on the centrality of languages and literatures to the broader project of envisioning what the changing idea of African Studies might look like; (b) drawing attention to those seemingly exhausted questions on the historiography of African languages, literatures and cultures that, nevertheless, remain forever new and relevant to the search for new futures; (c) taking stock of the ongoing sociocultural and linguistic intellectual capital from Africa that must exercise our collective minds as we ponder the future of Africa Studies; and (d) revisiting the debates and controversies around such concepts as African multilingualism, African language ecologies, the political economy of African national language policies and how they sit within the broader African Studies discourse. In reflecting on these four points, we seek to trouble and unsettle the perennial circulation of colonial epistemological and scholarly hegemonies in African Studies that have invisibilised important work that is foundational to the field. In our re-appraisal of silenced or ignored voices from language and literary studies, we will suggest fruitful pathways we might follow in cultivating an African Studies enterprise that centres conviviality, interconnectedness, interdependence and co-production as key hallmarks.

Hidden oracies: How are African heritage languages faring in Australia?

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Abstract

Many African migrant families retain their heritage languages for use in the family and community domains, despite English being the dominant language in the context of Australia. What these heritage language maintenance choices indicate firmly is that African migrants are embracing and enacting multilingual identities and practices in the diaspora. However, not much is known about these retained heritage language use as they remain invisible within Australia's linguistic landscape. In this study we refer to these heritage languages as "hidden oracies", that is, invisible oral tradition-based languages tied to the home and community domains. We argue that not much is known about these languages, their use, and the contributions they make towards a multilingual Australian society. The research questions guiding the study are as follows: a) which languages do participants draw on and use to shape their everyday lives? b) how and where do participants use these languages? c) what are their perceptions of the social importance of these languages? Based on biographical maps (Busch, 2012, 2017) data from four African families were used to explore participants' understanding of identity and belonging in families, communities, and the society at large. Systematic analysis of the maps unravels participants' linguistic repertoires (Blommaert & Backus, 2011; Blommaert & Rampton, 2011) and how these translate into their attitudes in linguistic practices. This paper closes with a discussion of the importance of heritage language maintenance for building resilient communities with implications for language

policy.

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Comparativisms and African Studies in Australia: Sourcing fuel for an undead engine

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Abstract

In envisioning what the changing idea of African Studies might look like, as this roundtable seeks to do, we need to be wary of our current locatedness and its constraints on this area of scholarship. When thinking from Australia, envisioning the future of African Studies sounds daunting, antithetical altogether-- sourcing fuel for a dead engine. The sparse interest in the area, which bourgeoned among Australian academics after the first half of the twentieth century waned out too soon at the close of the century (Lyons 2003). It is even controversial whether there has ever been any African studies in Australia, compared to the area's status and vibrancy in other Western countries. Ours here is "a 'post-African studies era' in which the study of Africa is primarily carried out by scholars making use of African contexts and cases, without identifying Africa as their sole or primary research focus or academic identity." (Abraham & Weglars 2022, 15) I thus argue that our engine (African studies) is undead, in survivance and requires us to source for it every possible fuel. I envision comparativisms as case in point to put African studies on par with other area studies in Australia. Eleven years after Alice Pung's *Growing Up Asian in Australia* (2008)*,* Maxine-Beneba Clarke followed suit and published *Growing Up African in Australia*. The end of her introduction chimes with my view. "Our lives and stories are just as ordinary, extraordinary, joyous and devastating as those of any other group of Australians, and they deserve to be written into Australian letters." (Clarke 2019)

Against such a backdrop, my presentation falls in what is yet to be established as comparative Indigenous African and Australian studies. My endeavour first interrogates my own speaking position as a postcolonial African reader-critic of Indigenous Australian culture and literature, and what it means for any African to engage with Indigenous Australian cosmologies, epistemologies, and to meet with these cultural and literary artefacts and their philosophical underpinnings. I establish similarities between both worlds and that Indigenous African and Australian literature epitomise worlds that register aesthetics and poetics of entanglements and conviviality among all beings, humans and nonhumans.

Beyond Governance Linguicism: Linguistic discrimination against indigenous minorities in Postcolonial African political governance systems

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Abstract

Pioneering research scholarship on the concept of *linguicism* has persistently concentrated on examining linguistic discrimination from a racial perspective (See Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1996). Other scholars have probed *linguicism* across fields of education (Liggett, 2014; Murillo & Smith, 2011; Cho, 2017; Cushing, 2019; Nguyen, 2021, among others), public policy (Higgins et al. 2012), and more recently in disaster management (Uekusa, 2019). Although linguicism is illuminated within governance systems, there is a dearth of research examining how colonial languages engender social inequalities within African political governance systems, especially in Kenya. The premise is that the imposition of colonial languages in African states continues to exacerbate linguistic discrimination within the governance system that, invariably results in persistent political contestations. By using interviews and centering decolonial scholarship (Quijano, 2007; Smith, 2012) as a theoretical lens, the study seeks, firstly, to examine how linguistic discrimination against indigenous minorities is manifested in Kenya's political governance as represented by youths, women, and ordinary people and secondly, suggest the strategies of reducing governance linguicism. Preliminary results indicate that indigenous minorities are excluded in Kenya's political governance structures linguistically that, deny them access to equal employment opportunities, unequal resource distribution, and political power. Consequently, a user-friendly multilingual language policy framework is proposed in a bid to reduce governance linguicism. To this end, the study contributes to the ongoing debate on the concept of linguicism by adding another strand of 'governance linguicism' to understanding how linguistic discrimination is demonstrated in governance systems from the Global South.

Keywords: linguistic discrimination, linguicism, colonial languages, governance linguicism, political governance, indigenous minorities, decolonization

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