

## Language, Mobility, African Writers and Pan-Africanism

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### **Biodata**

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### **Abstract**

This paper argues that pan-Africanism is best seen and articulated as a flexible, inclusive, dynamic and complex aspiration in identity making and belonging. The micro and macro level importance of pan-Africanism, makes writing it both abstract and grounded, local and global, just as the unity, solidarities and relevance it seeks and promotes. Pan-Africanism, far from promising a single identity, is about offering a mental space for disparate identities to co-exist in freedom and dignity. The paper explores how African writers have dealt with the issue of language and mobility central to pan-Africanism, and argued in favour of recognising the creative negotiation and navigation by Africans of various linguistic and identity margins in their flexibility and conviviality about what it means to be African.

Keywords: Pan-Africanism, African Writers, African Literature, African Languages, African Nationalism, African Diasporas

### **Introduction**

Pan-Africanism emphasises African unity beyond identities confined by geography, primordialism and narrow nationalism, and champions socio-political inclusiveness for all those

who willingly claim or are compelled to identify with the “Black” race and a place called “Africa” (Fanon 19967; Senghor 1977; Mkandawire 2005; Bah 2005; Biney 2011). As a quest for a global Black or African community, Pan-Africanism is an *aspirational* project towards a world informed by solidarities and identities shaped by a humanity of common predicaments. It is the glue to hold together the dreams and aspirations of Blacks divided, inter alia, by geography, ethnicity, class, gender, age, culture or religion. Far from overlooking the divisions that these factors give rise to amongst Blacks locally and globally, Pan-Africanism promotes a strategic essentialism around the fact and experience of being Black in a world of hierarchies of purity shaped by being White. The fact of the forced or voluntary mobility that has made of being Black and African a global and dynamic reality, means pan-Africanism as an ideology and an aspiration is realisable anywhere in the world.

Little wonder that Pan-Africanism is claimed not only on the continent called Africa, but globally (Europe, United States, the Caribbean, Latin America, parts of South Asia, the Middle East, India, Australia, New Guinea, etc.). Indeed, as a movement, Pan-Africanism originated not in Africa, but in the West Indies, amid feelings of nostalgia about and occasional dreams of an eventual return to a lost home land – mother Africa. We are all familiar with the literature and music of nostalgia and dreams of an idealised Africa by diasporic writers and artists claiming descent with the continent (Chapman 1968). Just as we are familiar with the growing number of African-Americans who are tracing their DNA ancestry back to various regions and countries in Africa (J & Comaroff 2009: 40-41).

The term “Pan-Africanism” is credited to Henry Sylvestre-Williams, and Marcus Garvey, amongst others, renowned for organising the largest Pan-African movement in history (Dieng 2005). The ideal of unity for all peoples of African descent have found resonance globally, attracting intellectuals, writers, artists, leaders of religious and cultural movements, and politicians of varying renown. Pan-Africanism has inspired scholarly traditions that privilege African-centred knowledge production, epistemologies and perspectives that challenge perceived Eurocentric (mis)representations of Africa and people of African descent (Obenga 2001).

In what concerns the scripting of Pan-Africanism on the continent of Africa itself, one need only browse through a few of Nkrumah’s speeches to learn that “Africa must unite”<sup>1</sup> is the slogan that underlines and provides foundation to all his philosophies and, in fact, his legacy. For Nkrumah, pan-Africanism was not merely an intellectual catchphrase used to garner political support but a series of actions directed at total liberation and consolidation of freedom for those

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<sup>1</sup> Title to one of his books.

who identified themselves as African – whether *Africans of the soil* or *Africans of the blood* (Mazrui 2005:70). Accompanying his devotion to the idea of a united, borderless Africa were the ideas of total African independence (both political and economic), African agency, cooperation among African states, nationalist policies complementing continental and diasporic endeavours, active rediscovery of African history and past achievements as well as an awareness of the “triple consciousness” embodied by Africans (Poe 2003:1-7).

This, of course, is an oversimplification of *Nkrumahism* – Nkrumah’s version of Pan-Africanism (Biney 2011). However, these six elements, as invaluable limbs to the idea of African unity as Nkrumah perceived it, highlight the complexity of his idea of Africa. Moreover, it is with care, with careful consideration of the multiple and varying strains as well as contexts that feed into any single African’s identity, that pan-African endeavours should be approached and critiqued.

It is in light of these complexities and nuances on the dynamic and complex reality of being African – of which Nkrumah was mindful and sympathetic – that this paper explores scripting pan-Africanism in African literature. The paper seeks to establish the extent to which African writers have embraced and promoted Pan-Africanism, and examines how open and inclusive they have been in this regard. Hence the paper looks at aspects and themes such as African/Black unity, African/Black ways of knowing (African-centred epistemologies), African/Black pride and dignity, cultural revalorisation, pan-African experiences (how these inform characterisation, themes, plots, creativity and innovation), etc. It also examines the extent to which Pan-Africanism remains popular with successive generations of authors, and among female and male, francophone and anglophone, lusophone and arabophone, authors, among others (Achebe 2000; Mkwandawire 2005; Sutherland-Addy and Diaw 2005; Beckman and Adeoti 2006; Okolo 2007; Bah 2005).

### **Scripting pan-Africanism – A Complex Aspiration**

What does it mean to write in a pan-African manner? This is a question as difficult to answer as one that seeks to limit the possibilities of what it means to be pan-African in a dynamic and creative world, where Africans have the capacity, or at least the hope to keep re-inventing themselves. Thus, to knight some literary contributors with the “pan-Africanist” title while condemning others as “anti” or “non” pan-African seems too godly a task. Furthermore, searching for literature that merely epitomizes Nkrumah’s views seems an approach that demands an active neglect of the extent to which interpretation, appropriation and context play a role even within the minds and practices of the most religious Nkrumah followers. Meaning

being contextual and subject to renegotiation with changing experiences, means that every text is capable of enhancing and even outgrowing its intended meaning.

Thus, we would like to conclude right here, at the beginning of this paper, that no single author, piece of writing, performer, performance, sculptor, sculpture, politician, policy, intellectual, theory, etc, can single-handedly be expected to actualize Nkrumah's or whoever's dream of pan-Africanism. And perhaps we should not expect them to. Nkrumah advocated African agency, and it is with such freedom of thought and action that authors have sought to articulate the complex realities of postcolonial Africa, in the characters they create and the stories they craft. Even when authors have caricatured ideas and persons, it should be understood more like a literary or pedagogical device aimed at foregrounding often taken for granted aspects of human nature or what it means to be African and pan-African in real terms in a world on the move.

It is also with agency that pan-Africanist magazines, journals and networks such as Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and South Africa (OSSREA), Association of African Universities (AAU), Chimurenga and Pambazuka News, have sought not only to revive pan-Africanism, but also to render such revivalism relevant to the challenges of the present context. Nkrumah advocated pride in the cultures, histories and peoples of Africa and African descent, a plea re-actualised by musicians such as Fela Kuti of Nigeria and Bob Marley of Jamaica, and creatively appropriated by younger generation writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who are constantly negotiating and navigating such myriad identity margins as epitomised by President Barrack Obama (Obama 2004).

It is in heeding such a call that authors such as Achebe and p'Bitek have not only documented the richness of Igbo and Acholi cultures respectively, but have made their writings epitomes of the imagery and figures of speech that make of the Igbo and Acholi languages the heritage, pride and treasure of their people, without seeking to limit the ambitions of these very same people to a monolithic sense of heritage, pride and treasure. The writings are crafted with such care and are so colourfully embedded in the cultures and languages from which the authors draw, that they serve to invite readers not only to admire and desire the writers' oratory but also to ponder their own and reflect on the similarities behind an appearance of difference. When Achebe, for example, writes that proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten in his Igbo community, he offers readers throughout Africa and the African diaspora, an opportunity to compare and situate his work in relation to their own lived experiences and practices, thereby fostering, even unconsciously, the idea of pan-Africanism as an aspiration for shared meaning

(Achebe 1986, 2000; p'Biteh 1984; Okolo 2007; Beckman and Adeoti 2006).

Nkrumah advocated political independence for Africa, drawing as much from as he fed into the experiences of Africans in the diaspora (Biney 2011). Ngugi raised his hand the highest in the class of noteworthy Anglophone writers and pronounced his shift to writing, first and foremost, in Gikuyu, despite criticism that such a focus on his native Gikuyu community and language would make his writing inaccessible to his other African readers. He saw in this move the best form of the mental decolonisation he sought, what effective independence as a writer meant, and what he imagined his obligations to be. To him, pan-Africanism translated into pride and self-worth, but had its foundation in the valorisation of endogenous African languages, which under colonial education and might were relegated to the background in favour of European languages (Ngugi 1986, 1997, 2005).

In light of the different positions by African writers on what African cultures mean and the role of language in promoting them, each African literary work should not be judged at face value with cosmetic indicators, but rather, should be seen as open to multiple interpretations. Each text is thus potentially for or against pan-Africanism, depending on what meaning is given such an aspirational identity. Critical of narrow nationalism though the idea of pan-African unity is, every claim or seeming articulation of narrow nationalism could always be justified in the argument that continental and transcontinental pan-Africanism can only succeed to the extent that it is solidly founded on local and micro level solidarities within the constituent nation-states of Africa and the African diaspora. In the same way, writers can only appeal to universal humanity by writing about the human experiences they know at a local, national level.

It is thus not by denying culture difference or glossing over the challenges of multiple languages, multiple identities, borders and boundaries that pan-Africanism shall be attained. Rather, it is in recognizing how different writers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds encourage African independence, freedom, unity, and dreams. Difference is thus best thought of as complementary to the pan-African aspiration that is premised on cooperation, not homogeneity of thought and action. Differently stated, perhaps in the assessing of pan-Africanism in literature, we should explore how Ngugi's insistence on Gikuyu builds pride and how that pride helps in reading Tutuola's, Achebe's and Wole's pidginisation/creolisation or the quest for lingua franca as authentic means of representation and popularisation as opposed to a mere quirk (Okolo 2007; Barber 1995). Consequently, in taking seriously the complexity of a Nigerian character's identity, a South African could, even in the slightest way, identify with the character or appreciate the nuances that exist beyond *District 9's* portrayal of Nigerians as a catalogue of negativities. In appreciating nuances, we may begin looking at Nyamnjoh's

Mimboland not as a single country occupied by *those* binge-drinkers that look like Dieudonné, but as a space we all occupy or would love to occupy in one way or the other, and with which we all must reckon as we seek to forge pan-African conviviality. In this way, pan-Africanism, far from promising a single identity, is about offering a mental space for disparate identities to co-exist in freedom and dignity.

In viewing the efforts and works of writers in this way, moments of unity on a macro-level are given the space to emerge from very micro-level efforts. Thus, small scale endeavours and activities are just as important to pan-Africanism as are large scale initiatives and abstract academic debates about the challenges of putting together what geography, race, ethnicity, class, language, gender and generation are so determined to put asunder. As eloquently articulated in a classroom debate on the subject of revising the role of the intellectual in present-day scholarship, this process of overcoming the differences and difficulties that exist amongst Africans, especially racial and ethnic differences, cannot be achieved through a miraculous, osmotic phenomenon. This process requires active strategizing, revising, and reflexivity. It requires as well taking into account the reality of Africans, big and small, as negotiators and navigators of various encounters with difference, local and global.

The challenges, posed by narrow identities or rigid yardsticks of inclusion were long predicated by Du Bois, in his rendition of pan-Africanism. Nkrumah, on the other hand, believed that in unity lay the solution to African problems (Biney 2011). It seems more relevant to our present Africa to consider dealing with these differences before, or better yet, whilst attempting to unite. An active pursuit of literary cooperation, or rather ways in which different literatures and literary differences can complement each other, needs to be brought to the fore in contemporary analyses of writing relevant to pan-Africanism. This is not to say it does not exist but to stress that instead of asking for all writers, all the time, to be faithful ambassadors for their traditions while simultaneously requiring them to be obviously Africa-friendly, it may be more useful to see what conversations the small scale has been having with the large scale and decipher what has worked thus far.

One of the most significant aspects of Nkrumah's vision of unity is that it leaves much space for collective and individual interpretation, thus allowing unity to be actualized from different angles and levels. Of course, this means that there will be conflicting views about how to go about uniting Africans and uniting as Africans, but then again, who ever heard of relatives who do not bicker at the peak of their affection for one another? In being open for discussion and interpretation, pan-Africanism is allowed to exist amongst the most mundane lived moments, belong to ordinary Africans, while also existing in academic, broad theory, and as a

social project. In this way, it is always in the process of becoming, always a fulfilling aspiration. This paper explores varying African texts with a specific focus on the language debate, and on accelerated flexible mobility and the reality of multiple identities in a continent and world glued, paradoxically, to ever diminishing circles of inclusion.

### **Language in the Scripting of pan-Africanism**

Central to the valorisation and reproduction of every culture or movement is communication, and key to communication is language. Colonialism was instrumental in the devaluation of endogenous African languages. A central pan-Africanism objective therefore, has been to seek ways of revalorising African languages, seeking lingua franca from the creative domestication and blending of colonial languages with endogenous African languages, and simply using the colonial languages in authentically African ways, in the manner artfully employed by Tutuola in the *Palm Wine Drinkard* and his other novels. Amos Tutuola's writings are an example of how Africans are busy creolising inherited European languages through promoting intercourse with African languages, and in turn enriching local languages through borrowings.

The question of language has thus received much attention, especially after 1963 when Obi Wali asked African writers to be mindful of the detrimental effects of using European languages uncritically (Wali 1963). Language was, and remains, highly contested and important to consider in the bid to foster and consolidate African independence and fulfil the ideal of being African. Language is intrinsically connected to a people's culture, history, ability to relate, in sum: a people's identity (Isola 1992; Ngugi 1986, 1997, 2005; Anyidoho 1989; Mazrui 2005:64; Okolo 2007). Despite the many, conflicting debates that have ensued from the heyday of new independence, a clear resolution cannot be said to have emerged. Still, the question of language has certainly not lost its value especially in this period of active pan-African revivalism in which we find ourselves, this very paper being a token of the revivalism.

The debate about a writer's choice in language, as Gyasi (1999) insists, is really a debate about a writer's attitude with regards to the European language; the value the writer assigns to the European language, how the writer uses the language and to what ends (Gyasi 1999:75). This attitude, in turn, speaks to the writer's attitude towards their own language and perhaps more significantly, their own identity. Of course, this very argument should be, and has been, inversed for writers using African languages. The attitude that writers have vis-à-vis the African language they use is also indicative of the writer's attitude toward European languages and yet again, their own identity. Mafeje on the other hand argues that "[i]t is not the language used which makes modern African literature 'African' but rather the symbols, the rhetoric, and the ethos invoked"

(Mafeje 1997:17). “These are identifiable as authentically African,” he continues. “That does not mean, however, that they are fixed. They are changeable according to the historical and social context” (Mafeje 1997:17). It is thus important to see how African writers creatively appropriate or endogenise European languages by infusing them with African symbolism and idioms.

Thus, in this paper, when we speak of language we take into consideration these changeable cultural aspects of language of which Mafeje speaks. However, to this list, characterization should be added. The addition seems fitting because it is through characters, particularly protagonists, their interaction with their environments, self-identification and the symbols, rhetoric and ethos invoked through *their* language that we gain great insight into an author’s attitude vis-à-vis language – indigenous or endogenous –, culture and identities. In accepting that language with the symbols, rhetoric and ethos embedded within it as well as characters moulded from it are what truly determine the Africanity of a text, we also accept that the perception of Africanity changes from author to author, and from text to text with the same author. Consequently, the changeable perception of Africanity translates into a changeable perception of how pan-Africanism is evoked within texts.

There are two dominant arguments included in the language debate that this paper explores in light of pan-Africanism. The first is an argument endorsed by Ngugi through his switch to writing in Gikuyu and Swahili. This argument holds that the only way to truly preserve African cultures is by preserving the languages in which they exist and grow. Writers like Ngugi therefore view writing in African languages as vital to this preservation process. Their quest to protect endangered languages and cultures is thus their contribution to pan-Africanism – seeking to restore pride in cultures at local levels and, more specifically, speaking to and in a language recognisable to their local communities. In this way he seeks to guarantee that he and his people shall not be gatecrashers or bystanders in the stories of their lives. Even Nkrumah, in his advocacy for unity, made no secret that Ghana and the British pattern may, at times, be emphasised because these were part of his personal experience and sources of inspiration for his political philosophies and intellectual processes (Nkrumah 1963: xi). When noted in line with Nkrumah’s acknowledgement of the role specific cultural systems played in shaping his very philosophies, one cannot help but realise the importance of cultures in their specificity. Moreover, one realises that actively seeking to preserve and promote particular cultural communities are by no means acts of anti-pan-Africanism, given that pan-Africanism is an aspiration with no predetermined footpaths beyond desired unity in diversity.

The second perspective in the language debate belongs to most writers including Achebe, Ekwensi, p’Bitek and Wole Soyinka who have chosen to “Africanize” or endogenise colonial

languages and/or write in pidgin instead of committing to “clean” versions of either colonial or indigenous languages. These authors not only consciously attempt to straddle the two languages, and in fact cultures, as effectively as possible, but have also placed emphasis on the multiculturalism and complexity involved in the lives of colonised peoples. This second category of literary contributors who write in colonial languages extends to encompass those who see colonial languages as tools for speaking to a larger African audience, including diasporic Africans and, depending on the author, the Arabic audience often and arbitrarily excluded from the African people checklist. These writers appeal to the practicality of colonial languages and in so doing, attempt to foster more inclusive conversations through their work. The reason these writers do not necessarily receive a category of their own is because although they first and foremost write in colonial languages, they aim to do so in a manner which speaks of and to African experiences. Consequently, as per Majefe’s definition of an Africanised text, by speaking to and of African experiences these authors include African symbols, characters, rhetoric, ethos and creative use of colonial languages within their texts. Here, the litmus test for pan-Africanism is not necessarily in how authentically African a language is, but rather, in how creative Africans are in their appropriation of colonial languages to address issues of pan-African resonance. In this way, colonial languages lose their foreignness through creative local usage.

It is in this regard that Karin Barber (1995) is instructive in her critique of the stringent binary between colonial and African languages which African literary critics, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, have come to emphasis in their dealing with the language question. She holds that by applying the binary without paying attention to the complexities involved, Africans’ experiences with the two languages are distorted and oversimplified. Furthermore, often, the implicit assumption in this binary has been that colonial languages possess a better value than African languages; a perpetuation of the colonial view of language (Barber 1995:11). The notion that African identity is a complex one and pan-Africanism an aspiration and dynamic quest for inclusion should be reiterated, to avoid oversimplification. Language categories are best seen as heuristic devices meant to illuminate the different yet often complementary pan-African rhetoric.

### ***The workings of pan-Africanism in an African tongue***

Ngugi has, on multiple occasions, stated that the struggle for liberation translates into a struggle for self-regulation and self-determination – the autonomy and dignity that Nkrumah saw as essential his idea of being African as aspiring to make possible (Ngugi 1986:4 & interviews). The choice of language in literature is important because language is central to self-definition in relation to one’s own body and mind, one’s nature, environment and universe as well as one’s

relation to others (Ngugi 1986, 1997, 2005). Thus, for Ngugi, language, as a means of communication, reinforces the culture embedded within it while language, as a carrier of culture, sustains the ability of people to communicate and reproduce themselves in dignity (Ngugi 1986:13-14). Once again the idea of language being intrinsically tied to identity comes to the fore.

In 1977, Ngugi and his colleagues at Nairobi University sought to explore matters of literature, theatre and culture outside the academic context, in a village near Nairobi<sup>2</sup>. It is here that the impracticalities of English as a means of communication amongst ordinary, non-literate Gikuyu-speaking Africans became most glaring to Ngugi. He made the switch from English to producing his creative works in Gikuyu, as a way of being relevant and effectively communicating with ordinary folks. The result of the shift was that his audience also became his prime market<sup>3</sup>, particularly in light of rural-based theatre. The effectiveness of this switch is often measured through the banning and arresting of Ngugi for his politically-charged play, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (I will marry when I choose) as well as *Matigari ma njirunngi* (Anyidoho 1988:21). In applying his literature to a lived context – among predominantly non-literate, rural Gikuyu speakers – Ngugi was able to deal with the question of promoting and preserving culture through language in the most practical terms: through Gikuyu, and through theatre (Okolo 2007).

Ngugi, as writer, responded directly to the neo-colonial situation in Kenya by raising consciousness<sup>4</sup>. This entailed challenging himself to overcome language as an obstacle between the intellectuals who often speak of the liberation and politics of “the masses” instead of speaking *to* and *with* “the masses” about liberation and politics. Moreover, Ngugi was also able to identify theatre as a practical means of conveying his literature. Thus, the meaning of the politics within his work had to be relevant, had to be *of the people* and through this, communication and culture were closely entwined. Ayi Kwei Armah<sup>5</sup> speaks of how important it is for empowered,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Akinwumi Isola asserts that there is a clear distinction between a writer’s market and audience (Isola 1992; 25). The audience applies to the people for whom the content of the text is relevant while the market refers to the people the book is marketed toward. For Isola, writers who publish their works in foreign languages confuse their market with their audience.

<sup>4</sup> The writer who responds directly to the problems in his own country and generally raises consciousness is what Ngugi stated as the role of the writer in an interview with Ndonde in 1968. This interview can be found in a compilation of interviews with Ngugi titled *Ngugi wa Thiongo Speaks* (see bibliography).

<sup>5</sup> This assertion is taken from Part 2 of Ayi Kwei Armah’s eight-part video recording on the topic of Africa’s need to reawaken. These can be found on *Youtube* under “Awakening”

thinking, self-trusting and self-sustaining communities to be encouraged, instead of having communities of people depend on leaders who prefer to withhold knowledge for their convenience, manipulate trust and understandably, who are incapable of popular governance, even with the best of good intentions. This simple yet crucial point is in line with the ideal of being African envisaged by Nkrumah: a self-determining, independent and confident personality able to look inward for answers and solutions to their own problems<sup>6</sup>. Ayi Kwei Armah's point is also in close conversation with Ngugi's decision to use Gikuyu.

Ngugi's shift to Gikuyu has of course been criticised as an anti-pan-Africanist move because of how writing in Gikuyu limits his literature to those who speak the language, thus excluding the majority of Africans. Notwithstanding the criticism, one cannot deny that Africa is in fact a fragmented, largely oral continent. Thus, even if Ngugi had written solely in English there would still be a large number of people unacquainted with his work. It is in looking to produce literature that speaks directly to and of his own environment that Ngugi decreases his risk of making abstract assertions about the obstacles facing "his people" in their bid for attaining and maintaining liberation and their ability to self-determine and self-regulate, the way academia often does. Also, in looking to the particular geographical spaces with which the literary contributor's identity is entwined, the idea of African solutions for African problems as advocated by Nkrumah is given the chance to materialize. Concentrating on the particular also leaves room for literature, in whatever form, to be translated into other languages thus bridging the gap between the national and international. What is more, translation made as mindfully as original texts<sup>7</sup>, allows these subsequent translated texts to take into consideration the idiosyncrasies of the presumed audience. This is not to assume that there exists a homogenised English or Swahili audience but to allow for the Gikuyu version to be translated by the author in a way that makes the material relevant and meaningful to these audiences too.

Notwithstanding the attractions to writing in African languages, there are indeed only a

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(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lv7JZceMCag&feature=related>).

<sup>6</sup> Momoh makes a similar point in his rejection of Africanist endeavours that openly embrace Eurocentric views instead of redefining African and Africans in a pan-Africanist, Afrocentric light. In his assertions he states that Afrocentric endeavours should look to imbue African people with hope and confidence (Momoh 1999: 13). This is an action that this paper has proposed Ngugi and others who have taken the steps to build and preserve the particular have aimed at achieving.

<sup>7</sup> The phrase is made in light of Gyasi's claim that Ngugi attempted to make the original, Gikuyu version of *Matigari* superior to the translated versions by not imbuing the latter version with the Gikuyu symbols, rhetoric and ethos Gyasi thought made the former a noteworthy text (Gyasi 1999:81). If nothing else, this very criticism proves the cultural value with which language is laden.

few writers who have taken the decision, like Ngugi, to write in endogenous African languages and received enough attention for them to be featured in the language debate. There are two reasons that immediately help explain this phenomenon, or lack thereof. The first is that often the audience really is not the market, especially for written texts, and writers - even those with intentions to raise the consciousness of people and build their particular countries and communities - tend to aspire to make a living out of their writing and perhaps even earn recognition beyond the community demographic (Owomoyela 1993:353-4). The second reason, which steers us to the next set of African writers, is that a growing number of people in Africa actually straddle both an African and colonial language thus inherit cultures and memories embedded in both. Still, although there are only a handful of authors who choose to produce their written works in only an African language, conception of literature cannot be limited to written forms. The more interactive forms of literature such as performance poetry – as in Zulu oral poetry, *izimbongo*, live audio drama and theatre (like in Ngugi’s case as well as Yoruba theatre) - are forms of literature that not only rely on African languages but also often thrive on being relevant to particular social contexts and details.

Ngugi and his followers have a point in the route they have chosen to emphasise in the pursuit of African dignity and dreams of pan-Africanism. Like him, Akinwumi Isola (1992) argues that African literature has to be in African languages, for African children to enjoy it not only as literature, but also as their identity, a source of pride. Others, like Karin Barber (1995), while agreeing with the need for the valorization of endogenous African languages, are critical of any assertion that seems to suggest Africans are passive consumers of colonial languages. Such views and their binary opposition, as far as she is concerned, oversimplify African experiences and creative appropriation and uses of languages, both foreign and local in origin. Just as endogenous African languages are the repository of the memories of the Africans who use these languages<sup>8</sup>, so too have Africans who have learnt to use colonial languages and function in local and global contexts shaped by those languages, have memories of which colonial languages are repositories. The challenge is thus not to seek to undo colonial influences in Africa, but rather to creatively blend them with endogenous influences, drawing on memories made possible by intimate encounters of both. It is therefore a people’s capacity to pass down the memory

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<sup>8</sup> Ngugi recurrently makes this point about language being the carrier of memory. An exemplary occasion is at his talk on “Planting African Memory: The Role of a Scholar in a Postcolonial World” which he delivered on March 30 2005 for The UO International Studies. This address can be found on *Youtube* through the following hyperlink (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oz87K9I3y2s&feature=related>)

embedded in language to succeeding generations as well as their capacity to negotiate the construction and preservation of new memories that make language a recurring, vital, dynamic topic of discussion.

### ***Straddling colonial and endogenous languages and cultures***

Multilingualism and multiculturalism may not be a new, surprising phenomenon especially on a continent housing a multitude of mobile language groups, often within close geopolitical and cultural proximity to each other. With the language debate, however, as Barber (1995) objects, the post-colonial writer's choice of language, thus culture, has often been painted as a simple choice between a European and an African language, thus a choice between identifying as faux European or proud African. As Barber asserts, neither the choice nor the situation is that simple because Africans have had different experiences with colonial languages as creative users. For example, while many ordinary South Africans are more fluent in Afrikaans as opposed to English, Swahili in East Africa was encouraged as a common means of communication and trade between Arabs, the British and Africans thus making it the most prevalent language to date in the region. Also on this point, while African Americans cannot choose to write in an African language even if they so wished, Yoruba-speaking Nigerians' narrative around colonial imposition includes missionaries *promoting* Yoruba-literacy as well the use of Yoruba in creative expression as opposed to the prevalent narrative of pawning "underprivileged" Yoruba off for "valuable" English (Barber 1995:15). In addition to the varying experiences with colonial languages, the diverse appropriations of endogenous languages and their blends with colonial languages have resulted in an amazing and constantly changing linguistic landscape in Africa. One need only slightly eavesdrop into a conversation between a group of township-bred males in a place like Soweto to hear a single sentence containing elaborate Afrikaans words, infused with hints of English and sandwiched between a combination of isiZulu and Sesotho-Tswana. Similarly, young cell phone and internet users combine endogenous African and European languages with fascinating creativity, in their chats and SMS texts (Demeurt and Masinyana 2008). These are the kinds of sentences that make grandmothers cringe at their impurity, grandfathers catch a case of déjà vu and school-teachers shake their heads in regret about falling standards of English and Afrikaans amongst modern day youth. The point here is that, because of the different experiences with African and colonial languages and, in fact, the varying experiences involved in being African, no Pan-African blueprint can be provided. Majefe notes:

...a difference is discernible between even contemporary modern African writers such as

Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and Okot p'Biket on the one hand, and Ousmane Sembene and Ngugi wa Thiong'o on the other. The former implicitly accepted the classical European model of "gemeinschaft" versus "Gesellschaft" but could not fully commit themselves to its logical imperative because they remained loyal to the traditional African ethos in conjunction with bourgeois liberal values. In our view, this is vividly reflected in works such as Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart, No longer at Ease, a Man of the People*, and *Arrow of God*; Wole Soyinka's *Interpreters*; Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lamino*, notwithstanding the nationalistic rhetoric in their texts. In contrast, Ousmane Sembene and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's works represent a critique of both traditional African societies and the perversions of bourgeois neo-colonialism in Africa....Yet, neither side could be accused of losing sight of what they perceive as the "Africanness" or "Africinity" of the landscapes they paint." (Mafeje 1997: 17)

It is evident that different authors tackle pan-Africanism from varying angles. Whereas some look to preserve and reproduce that which they believe can only be found in particular geopolitical spaces, others attempt to reconcile what is usually seen as opposing identities to create a postcolonial identity resembling their own lived experience as complex, dynamic and constantly renegotiated. Other authors look to, first and foremost, speak to Africans in the colonial languages and lingua franca that have presented themselves as vehicles for common communication. However, in viewing these approaches as complementary, one can see how important the micro and the macro levels are in articulating and keeping alive dreams of pan-Africanism. The relationship between the micro and the macro should not be viewed simply as a relationship between the national and international but also relationships between homes and community, villages and the national, the national and inter-continental, the individual and the group. It is in not promoting difference but accepting it nonetheless that both the choices of presenting texts in African languages and colonial languages can be seen as complementary. Indeed, all languages actively and creatively appropriated by Africans become endogenous African languages regardless of their origins. The test of what constitutes an African language thus becomes *how* Africans actively use and relate to any language, and not necessarily on whether or not the language is originally African.

### ***The Dangers of Narrow Nationalism***

One of the greatest threats to pan-Africanism in an Africa of flexible mobility – where it is all too common for people to move around like the “wandering cattlemen” of northern Nigeria in

Cyprian Ekwensi's *Burning Grass* (1964) – is the danger of narrow nationalism. This was a problem perceptively predicted by Franz Fanon in the nascent years of post-colonial nationalisms. As Fanon argued, citizenship, “instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilization of the people”, has turned out to be “only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been” with a greater sense of flexible inclusion (Fanon 1967:119). Under the coercive illusion of the “nation-state”, citizenship, far from celebrating a common humanity, has merely served to justify the trivialisation and debasement of some and the glorification of others. This is especially the case in today's world of accelerated mobility. As a continent of people on the move, it is a contradiction for nationalism to be predicated upon policing identities and seeking to confine flexible mobility to a handful of elite. Faced with ever more insidious ways by states and markets to police the movements of people and alternative cultural influences, all writers that choose not to take identities and belonging at face value, but to critically interrogate the boundaries of exclusion, can only be of service to pan-Africanism. These writers are an aspiration capable of uniting not only continental Africa and the African diaspora, but humanity at large, around the core values of what it means to be human and free.

In this regard, we would like to pay special tribute to the late South African novelist, Phaswane Mpe, author of *Welcome to our Hillbrow*. The novel explores the tensions and temptations of the sort of narrow nationalism which Fanon cautions against. Written basically in two voices, the novel dwells at length on the pros and cons of narrow nationalism and pan-Africanism. The first voice, in favour of narrow nationalism, celebrates official rhetoric internalised by ordinary black South Africans of having graduated into citizenship, only for this to be endangered by the influx of *Makwerkwere* (black Africans from countries further up beyond the Limpopo River) with little but trouble to offer.

There are black South Africans who feel strongly that *Makwerkwere* “should remain in their own countries and try to sort out the problems of these respective countries, rather than fleeing them”, since South Africa has “too many problems of its own”, and “cannot be expected to solve all the problems of Africa”. Negative views about African migrants are particularly dangerous when held by the police. We gather from the novel how policemen arrest *Makwerkwere*, “Drive them around Hillbrow for infinite periods of time”, saying: “See it for the last time, bastards” (Mpe 2001:21).

The second voice is more measured, and constantly tries to mitigate the tendency to scapegoat and stereotype *Makwerkwere*, who most of the time are not as guilty as they are painted. As we gather from the novel, it is outright dishonest to blame the woes of post-

apartheid South Africa entirely on *Makwerekwere*, who are often “too much in need of sanctuary... to risk attracting the attention of police and security services.” Unlike South African blacks, *Makwerekwere* are only too aware of how limited their recourse to legal defence is if they are caught. “The police could detain or deport them without allowing them any trial at all. Even the Department of Home Affairs ... [is] not sympathetic to their cause” and few seem to care that the treatment of *Makwerekwere* by the police, and the lack of sympathy from the influential Department of Home Affairs, runs “contrary to the human rights clauses detailed in the new constitution of the country” (Mpe 2001:23).

If South Africa is overflowing with *Makwerekwere* seeking greener pastures, it is partly in response to the welcoming gestures of the first president of the new South Africa, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, “unlike his predecessors who erected deadly electric wire fences around the boundaries of South Africa trying to keep out the barbarians from Mozambique Zaire Nigeria Congo Ivory Coast Zimbabwe Angola Zambia from all over Africa fleeing their war-torn countries populated with starvation like Ethiopia flashing across” (Mpe 2001:26). But once in South Africa, *Makwerekwere* are seldom welcome to stay, as South African media, television especially, drum up xenophobic sentiments with images of *Makwerekwere* “every now and then ... stretching their legs and spreading like pumpkin plants filling every corner of our city and turning each patch into a Hillbrow coming to take our jobs in the new democratic rainbowism of African Renaissance that threatened the future of the locals Bafana Bafana fans” (Mpe 2001:26-27). While they may show vocal support for black non-South African football teams, whenever they played against European clubs, some local Bafana Bafana fans demonstrate “glaringly ... prejudice towards black foreigners the rest of the time”, snatching every opportunity “to complain about the crime and grime in Hillbrow,” for which they hold such foreigners responsible – “not just for the physical decay of the place, but the moral decay” as well. Black and white South Africans tend to be agreed that “Hillbrow had been just fine until those Nigerians came in here with all their drug dealing” (Mpe 2001:17,118).

Mpe reminds us of how easily narrow nationalism can jeopardise pan-Africanism. How, he asks, through one of his characters, could South Africans have become so oblivious of the gestures of pan-African hospitality and solidarity they received in the days of apartheid? How could they forget that “some *Makwerekwere* were fleeing their war-torn countries to seek sanctuary here in our country, in the same way that many South Africans were forced into exile in Zambia, Zaire, Nigeria and other African and Non- African countries during the Apartheid era”? (Mpe 2001:18-19; see also Neocosmos 2010).

Obsession with narrow nationalism is not exclusive to South Africa (Nyamnjoh 2006,

2010; Englebert 2009:197-218). The rhetoric of pan-Africanism, free flows and dissolving boundaries is countered by the intensifying reality of borders, divisions and violent strategies of exclusion almost everywhere on the continent. Nkrumah, addressing heads of state in Addis Ababa, warned that a gradual approach to African unity would possibly deepen isolations and exclusiveness thus making unity and peace harder to actualise. As the current reality of national and intra-national tensions would have, Nkrumah was right (Nkrumah 1963; Biney 2011). The questioning of previous assumptions about nationality, citizenship, solidarity and interconnectedness is on the increase. This is as true of how nationals and citizens perceive and behave towards one another as insiders, as it is of how they behave towards immigrants, migrants, and/or foreigners as outsiders. The crisis of citizenship and subjection flamed by mutually exclusionary discourses and claims of entitlement and injury by the Hutu-Tutsi divide in Rwanda that resulted in the genocidal extravaganza of 1994 (Mamdani 2001), along with the current conflict in Côte d'Ivoire fuelled by competing and exclusionary claims of *Ivoirité* [Ivorianness] (Thiémélé 2003) are sufficiently indicative of how increasingly difficult it is to be sanguine about belonging in Africa, despite continued aspirations towards pan-Africanism.

### **Acting out the Pan-African script: counter-actions to narrow nationalism**

Up until this point of the paper, we have argued for single acts and texts from literary contributors to be viewed as branches that potentially make up the ideological and aspirational tree that is pan-Africanism. In the section above, we have noted that the perils of overly-narrow and excluding narratives cannot and should not be overlooked. Nevertheless, we still insist that it is in cultivating a spirit of independence and pride for many ordinary, often non-Europhone people, together with attempting to unify Africans on a broader level that pan-Africanism can really be realised. This part of the paper, however, serves as telling of the multitude of literary works, organisations and literary contributors that actively work to foster pan-African unity, cross-border collaborations and inter-continental partnerships amongst Africans. Our point is to elaborate on the virtues of the vernacular, verbal and material practices of Africans who happily incorporate the foreign into everyday struggles for survival. In this section we posit the thesis of Afropolitanism as founded in tracing the linkages to how these everyday practices have been picked up by African writers as diagnostic of what would otherwise be taken to as diverse ways of being.

At the beginning of his career, Wole Soyinka had a preoccupation with Southern Africa and wrote extensively about colonialism in the region. Soyinka has written poems for Nyerere in 'Ujamaa' and has published an anthology titled *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems*. Moreover, in *The*

*Fourth Stage* Soyinka has gone beyond attempting to unite Africans by conjoining Greek and Yoruba deities and realities to illuminate the similarities running through humanity in general. In an interview with Biodun Jeyifo, Soyinka stated that those, such as Chinweizu, who have accused him of being a Europhile for drawing on European traditions and cultures and collapsing the dichotomy between what is seen as European and African, fail to recognise or rather appreciate that creativity draws from many sources (Jeyifo, 1985). His intra-continental as well as inter-continental contributions should still be viewed in light of the fact that he has produced poetry in Yoruba as well as creative works, including radio skits and theatre sketches, that speak directly to Nigeria and West Africa. These examples alone indicate the centrality of pan-Africanism in Soyinka's works. What is more striking is his unapologetic attitude about not only being influenced by ideas and struggles beyond West Africa but also seeking to unearth creativity wherever it can be found. Thus, according to Soyinka, if pan-Africanism is an aspiration towards reconquering Africa's humanity diminished by colonial encounters, what can be better than appealing to African and Greek deities to re-enchant the world as a whole with humanity?

Ayi Kwei Armah set out to write a modern novel using the plural voice of the people through the concept of Anansi – the tale of the trickster spider prevalent in West Africa. In order to attain this plural voice, he actively explored this concept of Anansi in the different African regions<sup>9</sup>. It is in seeking the similarities - the threads that run through supposedly different societies - and seeking them in the oral traditions in which such African cultural symbols exist that we acknowledge Ayi Kwei Armah's efforts and contributions to the ever widening circles of inclusion that being African entails.

CODESRIA goes beyond being a research institute, to assume the position of intellectual flag-bearer of pan-Africanism. It champions the quest for African perspectives and methodologies to inform African knowledge production. Conscious to the cultural and linguistic diversity of the continent, CODESRIA plays a leading role of encouraging interaction and networking across the various subregions, disciplines and languages divides. It organises workshops and seminars that provide for simultaneous interpretation between French, English, Portuguese and Arabic, as its four working languages. In addition to publishing in all four languages, CODESRIA also translates from one language to another, the books it publishes. CODESRIA regularly celebrates African achievements, illuminate histories, and pays tributes to outstanding African intellectuals such as Kwame Nkrumah, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Archie Mafeje, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Wole Soyinka. In this regard, CODESRIA is able to keep alive pan-Africanism and its aspirations in scholarly debates, research endeavours, and policy circles

through promoting policy dialogue between scholars and political and civil society leaders.

FESPACO (Festival panafricain du cinéma et de la télévision de Ouagadougou) is the largest film and television festival in Africa, hosted biennially in Burkina Faso, which focuses on African Film and African Filmmakers. PAFF (Pan African Film Festival), on the other hand, is a larger version of FESPACO held in the United States. PAFF, from 1992 when it first began, not only attempts to promote the African American film industry but also hosts films and other culturally inspired forms of art such as poetry and art from Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe and other people of African descent. The point here is not to glamourise the reach of PAFF over FESPACO but attempt to illuminate the multiple efforts that have gone into promoting visual literature on the continent and amongst Africans. Similar efforts have been made on smaller scales.

Poetry Africa as well as other pan-African poetry endeavours such as Badilisha play a vital role in promoting storytelling, creative writing and performance in its many forms. Not only do they bring together poets to perform annually, these organisations also bring them together to conduct workshops, produce collaborative works and host talks in alternative spaces such as schools and community-based arts groups - usually among younger people. It is through Poetry Africa that poets from across South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe and even the USA gather as audiences and performers. It is in the spirit of establishing and encouraging artistic networks that poets such as D’Bi Young, a Jamaican-Canadian, have returned to places like South Africa to produce shows with Cape Townian arts, including students, beyond the initial Badilisha spaces. As of 2010, Badilisha also established itself as a space to connect poets online by allowing and encouraging poets to post and share their recorded works. Not only has this allowed oral literature to, necessarily, exist in virtual spaces that young people occupy but it has also made access to poetry and storytelling easier for those who cannot attend these annual performances. Thus, it is the networking, making literature accessible, appealing to younger generations and allowing for performances to be defined and redefined as artists see fit that unity (across races, generations and nationalities), innovation and pride around the oral forms of literature are fostered. It is through efforts such that pan-Africanism is conjured up and enacted.

“Who no know go know” This quote from Fela Kuti is one intrinsically associated with the *Chimurenga*. Fela Kuti himself was a leading pan-Africanist<sup>10</sup> who looked to other forms of

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<sup>9</sup> This can be found in Part 5 of Ayi Kwei Armah’s “Awakening”, on Youtube.

<sup>10</sup> Randall Grass has written an impressive account of Fela Kuti as a musical maestro, a rebel, political critic as well as an extreme pan-Africanist whose views and actions often asked of Africans to revert back to traditionalism to be truly pan-African and African (Grass 1986)

music, especially African, to create his *Afrobeat* music, thus making his constantly included quote mimetic of *Chimurenga's* objectives. “Chimurenga” is a Zimbabwean term popularized by Thomas Mapfumo, whose music was named *Chimurenga* because it represented the struggles of the common people. Since then, “Chimurenga” has come to be synonymous with a Pan-Africanist journal, founded by Ntone Edjabe in 2002. The journal is aimed at bringing to the fore past African icons, present ways of exploring what it means to be African and proud, as well problems such as xenophobia, with which Africans, in their flexible mobility, are faced. The topics covered include literary works, poetry, other pan-Africanist movements, trends, art and cover a large spectrum of people and icons from Africans. *Chimurenga* publishes a journal both online and in hard copy. One of the most crucial attributes of *Chimurenga* is that it is intently aimed at bringing pan-Africanism to the younger generation, who are increasingly border-crossers and bridge-builders across a broad range of cultures locally and globally. Thus, its achievements lie not only in bridging the gap between borders and intellectuals but also between generations and the fragmented youth publics on the continent.

*Pambazuka News* is in its 10<sup>th</sup> year as a leading electronic bulletin for “pan-African voices for freedom and justice”. *Pambazuka*, which means “dawn” or “to arise” in Kiswahili, has as mission to “disseminate analysis and debate on the struggle for freedom and justice” in Africa and the global South. “*Pambazuka News* is produced by a pan-African community of some 2,600 citizens and organisations – academics, policy makers, social activists, women’s organisations, civil society organisations, writers, artists, poets, bloggers, and commentators who together produce insightful, sharp and thoughtful analyses and make it one of the largest and most innovative and influential web forums for social justice in Africa.” It is significant, not only that its founder and editor-in-chief – Firoze Manji – is a leading Kenyan public intellectual of Indian descent, but also, that *Pambazuka News* has rapidly become an authoritative platform for weekly commentary on topical local and global issues by intellectuals and activists for social change from Africa and the African diaspora.<sup>11</sup> To deny Firoze Manji his Indian origins in the making of his Kenyanness and pan-Africanism, would be to impoverish the otherwise infinite possibilities of being African epitomized by diasporas in general, and the African diaspora in particular. This is indicative of the sort of flexibility and inclusiveness in belonging that best guarantees the attainment of pan-Africanism as an aspiration in a world where Africanity is dynamic, complex and constantly renegotiated by Africans and African diasporas, especially the youth.

While these examples are clearly limited, they however represent ongoing efforts made by writers and pan-African organisation towards keeping alive the pan-African aspirations of

Africans and diasporic Africans as open-ended identities. They are testimonies of achieved and achievable pan-Africanist efforts. Present day pan-Africanism draws from and feeds into the pan-Africanism of the past, and its decentralised nature promises an even more accommodating future those seeking solidarities as Africans and Africans in the making (Mazrui 2005:64). The fact that the interests of pan-Africanism may also be served by non-Africans, and sometimes even by those considered by Africans as imperialists, is best illustrated by the story of the setting up by Alan Hill of Heinemann publishers of the “African Writers Series”, that made African literature available in Africa and to the wider world, and that has published most of the writers discussed in this paper (Currey 2008).

### **Conclusion**

Pan-Africanism as an aspiration and work in progress has left few writers in Africa and the African diaspora indifferent. There is no single route for attaining the pan-African dream, and as Anyidoho observes, “writers of the pan-Africanism world have always operated and continue to operate along lines that are remarkably similar, in basic orientation as well as in artistic strategy and technique” despite the geographical, historical, cultural, linguistic and political challenges facing them. The fact that they have refused to give up in the face of myriad adversities, means that African writers at home and in the diaspora are not lost to one another and to themselves regardless of their history and present circumstances (Anyidoho 1989: 43).

Writing as communication is subject to multiple interpretations, with intended and unintended meanings. It is therefore not in enough to simply dwell on whether or not the author is consciously pan-African in the crafting of their texts, but to seek to establish the effects and interpretation of the text in the short, medium and long term that could contribute, often indirectly to the crystallisation and edification of pan-African aspirations. Thus, it is not unthinkable that the same text would at different times in history and in different contexts be simultaneously pan-African and anti-pan-African, universalist and nationalist, fix and fluid, African and beyond African. Such ambivalence is in the nature of text and contextual meaning making. For every powerful, violent, and anti-pan-Africanist example that one witnesses an equally powerful, ambitious and hope-bearing pan-Africanist talks back to it.

We have argued that the promotion of indigenous and endogenous languages and cultures does not have to be at odds with the use of colonial languages and cultures, in a context where Africans, big and small, are actively navigating and negotiating their various heritages in favour of pan-Africanism as a complex, inclusive and dynamic aspiration towards dignity and

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/about.php>

humanity for all. In this regard, different conceptions of pan-Africanism do not have to be at odds with one another but can be viewed as complementary – a sort of unity in diversity that being pan-African calls for. The promotion of pan-Africanism cannot be a promotion of sameness, even as Africans should be encouraged to emphasise inclusion over and above exclusion.

Africanizing texts, upholding African languages in creative endeavours, utilising concepts and subject matter from other Africans' experiences and letting younger generations (re)define Africanism and pan-Africanism for themselves are all simple yet promising ways of achieving pan-Africanism. As a text in the making, pan-Africanism is a collective effort in diversity, where the experience of difference both enriches and challenges, and victimhood galvanised to offer the world an opportunity to Africanise humanity and humanise Africanity.

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