CENTRE FOR FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES

ESSAY/PROJECT COVER SHEET

FULL NAME: Nana Afua Kennedy-Kwofie

STUDENT NUMBER: KNNNAN003

CONTACT NUMBER: +27794498659

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Lecturer/Supervisor/Marker's Name: Wallace Chuma

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Until Lions Learn To Speak...

Placing The African Oral Tradition At The Centre Of Power, Knowledge, And Media

By Nana Afua Kennedy-Kwofie

Introduction

The production of knowledge has become a matter of power rather than truth. The nature of what we know, how we know and why we know is embedded in an asymmetrical power relationship between the Global North and the Global South. There is no doubt that Africa is a continent that was ravaged by the colonial system. The imprints of European colonialism are still visible today in many aspects of African society. The colonisation of the African continent by Europeans painted Africa as an uneducated and dark continent that had no history and no knowledge. This belief has led to assumptions about knowledge production which are embedded in racist conventions rather than the free and fair pursuit of complete knowledge. The processes of knowledge production are ranked in a hierarchy and in this system of classification, focus on the written word has dominated curriculums while other systems of knowledge production, specifically the oral tradition, have largely been undervalued and ignored. As such, what is a vibrant, complex and active tradition of African orality in the pursuit and preservation of knowledge has been relegated to the back rooms of academia and scholars are not allowed to access to a variety of methods that can be used to know and understand the world. In analysing the current climate of knowledge production and the role media plays in Africa we must examine several questions: How did the West become the centre of knowledge production? What value can be extracted from the African oral tradition in the pursuit of knowledge in the current system of knowledge production? What are the implications of this on Africans as producers of knowledge and Africa's media landscape? While this creative project does not answer these questions entirely, it opens conversations about how we understand and experience knowledge, media, and power in an African context. Guided by the frameworks of power and postcolonial theory and decolonisation, this creative project aims to offer a critical but open-ended analysis of the

state of African knowledge production and media while centring the African oral tradition in a bid to broaden the current epistemological landscape as an act of decolonisation. This project also aims to begin the work of creating a collection of oral stories to highlight the wisdom and insight that comes from the African oral tradition and what it can offer.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Knowledge and Power, Power and Knowledge

From the who we study, to how we access knowledge, and where we study; all the current processes of knowledge production are shaped by discourses of power. The work of French philosopher Michel Foucault (1972) contends that power and knowledge are inextricably linked and found that whoever is the dominant or ruling class in society has a greater capacity to produce effects in the world and mould the thoughts and beliefs of everyday people. Foucault's term discourse describes how a social system that produces knowledge and meaning. Using the means of discourse, power defines what is seen as normal in a way that claims to be naturally authentic when it is actually not. As such, the powerful have the ability to describe, create and structure. When discourse becomes internalized, the wants and needs of the dominant group are "presented as reflecting everyone's best interests, thereby getting oppressed groups to accept the dominant group's interests as their own and minimize conflict" (Pyke, 2010: 556) The 'ideology of power' (Therborn, 1980) describes how a small minority exerts control over a majority with the concept that social conditions are unchangeable and normal. In this sense "the Normal is established as a principle of coercion" (Foucault, 1975: 184) as it serves as a tool to compare, differentiate, hierarchize, and exclude. Concerning education Foucault recognized its ability in maintaining the status quo of power relations when he said:

> Education may well be, as of right, the instrument whereby every individual, in a society like our own, can gain access to any kind of discourse. But we well know that in its distribution, in what it permits and in what it prevents, it follows the well-trodden battle- lines of social conflict. Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it. (Foucault, 2005: 325)

In the academic realm, the normal is reinforced in the ways in which curriculums are predominantly Western and white (Mamdani, 1993). The current practices of scholarship centre Western perspectives which serve to strengthen the disparity of power between the Global South and Global North (Mbembe, 2015). Western powers have been able to reinforce "vocabularies, scholarship, imagery, and doctrines" (Said, 1978 :3) that establish it as commander in the production and dissemination of knowledge in a way that is painted as universal but in actuality is problematic. Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe further explains:

> It is a canon that disregards other epistemic traditions. It is a canon that tries to portray colonialism as a normal form of social relations between human beings rather than a system of exploitation and oppression. Furthermore, Western epistemic traditions are traditions that claim detachment of the known from the knower. They rest on a division between mind and world, or between reason and nature as an ontological a priori. They are traditions in which the knowing subject is enclosed in itself and peeks out at a world of objects and produces supposedly objective knowledge of those objects. The knowing subject is thus able, we are told, to know the world without being part of that world and he or she is by all accounts able to produce knowledge that is supposed to be universal and independent of context. The

> problem – because there is a problem indeed – with this tradition is that it has become hegemonic. This hegemonic notion of knowledge production has generated discursive scientific practices and has set up interpretive frames that make it difficult to think outside of these frames. But this is not all. This hegemonic tradition has not only become hegemonic. It also actively represses anything that actually is articulated, thought and envisioned from outside of these frames (Mbembe, 2015: 9)

The danger of this discourse is that it "excludes other ways of thinking and speaking by establishing an apparently static, common sense, and universal understanding of truth" (Warburton, 2016: 250). What is being communicated over and over again is that Eurocentric ways of knowledge production are the only way to know and understand in the world (Mbembe, 2016). As such, the belief held by many that these social conditions are fixed and normal works as a form of power the Global North exerts over the Global South. However, in analysing the representation of the truth, power and knowledge that discourse provides us, the work of Roxanne Lynn Doty proves helpful as she prompts us to shift and ask *why* questions instead of *how* questions. "How questions thus highlight an important aspect of power that why questions too often neglect: the way in which power works to constitute particular modes of subjectivity and interpretive disposition…it is a kind of power that produces meaning, subject identities, their interrelationships and a range of imaginable conduct" (1996: 4) This viewpoint allows us to see power as productive and reveal the ways in which discourse has been used to enable and constrain. For the purposes of this study, the how questions I want to explore are the following:

How did the West become the centre of knowledge production?

And how do Africans access the intellectual, cultural and historical heritage that was subjugated by colonialism?

How did the West become the centre of knowledge production?

Understanding the historical context of the African within this study is essential in understanding the productive power of the colonialism in the realm of knowledge production. Contrary to popular belief, the story of African knowledge did not begin with the arrival of European colonisation. Pre-colonial African communities had complex and sophisticated knowledge systems, cultures, and languages (Elabor-Idemudia, 2002). However, all this was disrupted when Europeans arrived on African shores with the oppressive and violent practices of colonialism. (Wa Thiong'o, 1986). In discussing the productiveness of power in the realm of knowledge production we must differentiate between colonialism and coloniality. The work of Maldonado-Torres puts it this way:

> Coloniality is different from colonialism. Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such a nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects, we breathe coloniality all the time and every day. (Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 243).

Coloniality manifests as an invisible matrix of power that establishes control in four main domains which are the "control of economy; control of authority, control of gender and sexuality; and, control of subjectivity and knowledge' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 37 referencing Quijano) Although these four aspects are interrelated, my focus in this paper is the control of subjectivity and knowledge which manifested in the destructive belief held by the colonialists that they had a paternal duty to educate the 'uncivilised' peoples of the colonies (Mudimbe, 1985:181). In a bid to legitimize their colonial endeavour the Europeans established colonial academic institutions that promoted Eurocentric ways of knowing that were disguised as a vehicle to develop Africa and bring the African to modernity but actually work to subjugate the colonised. As decolonial scholar Walter Mignolo puts it, "there is no modernity without coloniality" (2009: 39). Colonisation of the African took form in two ways: the first conquered physical bodies and geographical spaces while the second conquered the minds and the beliefs of the colonised (Le Grange. 2016). Through the use of academic institutions and the media, colonisers were able to invent Africa and what it meant to be an African (Mbembe & Balakrishnan, 2016; Mudimbe,1989). It is crucial to note that a key feature that allowed the Europeans to maintain dominance with these systems of knowledge was the claim of universality which "normalised" them in the Foucauldian sense. Mignolo states this:

> ... the key concept of coloniality calls into question the idea that knowledge is disembodied and independent of any specific geohistorical locations. The members involved in the project argue that such belief has been created and implanted by dominant principles of knowledge that originated in Europe since the Renaissance. In order to build a universal conception of knowledge, Western epistemology (from Christian theology to secular philosophy and science) has pretended that knowledge

> is independent of the geohistorical (Christian Europe) and biographical conditions (Christian white men living in Christian Europe) in which it is produced. As a result, Europe became the locus of epistemic enunciation, and the rest of the world became the object to be described and studied from the European (and, later on, the United States), perspective. (Mignolo, 2011: no page)

As a result, Eurocentric systems of knowledge production became the primary model for all knowledge which meant the historical and intellectual achievements of African people were subjugated, manipulated and sometimes even destroyed (Mamdani, 1996). "Colonial domination required a whole way of thinking, a discourse in which everything that is advanced, good and civilised is defined and measured in European terms" (Kelley, 2000: 27). The term "epistemic violence" coined by Gayatri Spivak (1988) describes how Western domination subjugated and violently wiped out the histories of colonised peoples. One consequence of colonialism's "violence of imperialistic epistemic, social and disciplinary inscription" (1988:39) is the internalized sense of inferiority colonized people inherited which has led to a desire to be more like the colonisers. (Fanon, 2008; Mudimbe,1985). At present Europe, and the West dictate what is considered knowledge and the epistemic violence Africans experience has led to the false impression that Africa doesn't have anything to offer to the modern world. The epistemic violence of colonialism was disguised as development and modernisation when essentially it robbed Africa of its sovereignty, freedom, and power. (Hoppers, 2001) This creates a condition where Africans constantly believe they have to conform to Western standards so they can succeed (Wa Thiong'o, 1986). The lack of African and black academics means that the story told in classrooms about the dominance Western academia remains undisputed which has consequences on the academic experience of Africans because they see themselves from the viewpoint of the

colonisers. The failure to diversify curriculums is being interrogated and many are calling for the inclusion of a greater number of African academics, theories and methods in the curriculum.

Decolonisation & Postcolonial theory

In a bid to break ties with colonialism and coloniality, the process known as decolonisation must take place. Perhaps the simplest way to understand the term decolonisation is an undoing of the changes imposed by colonialism. One might be tempted to believe that the act of removing the physical institutions and governments put in place by colonialism would constitute full decolonisation. However, as Ramon Grosfoguel explains:

> One of the most powerful myths of the twentieth century was the notion that the elimination of colonial administrations amounted to the decolonization of the world. This led to the myth of the 'postcolonial' world. The heterogeneous and multiple global structures put in place over a period of 450 years did not evaporate with the juridical-political decolonization of the periphery over the past 50 years. We continue to live under the same 'colonial power matrix'...we moved from a period of 'global colonialism' to the current period of 'global coloniality') (2007: 219).

The reality of decolonisation is far more complex. Decolonisation is the solution to a problem that needs to be solved with a multipronged approach because while 'direct colonial rule may have disappeared… colonialism, in its many disguises as cultural, economic, political and knowledge-based oppression, lives on' (Sardar, 2008: xix). For Frantz Fanon (1963), colonialism and decolonisation are forever bound by history and violence. He reveals how education was used to manipulate Africa's past while also destroying its future. Decolonisation for Fanon is about restoring the humanity of the colonised that was violently taken away by the colonialism and posits that the violence of colonialism deserves an equal

measure of violence in the process of decolonisation as the two can never be divorced from one another.

> Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding. Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say that it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content. Decolonization never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them. It brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men, and with it a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the "thing" which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself. (35 - 36)

For the colonised and the act of decolonisation is a way to assert one's agency and although Fanon was referring to political decolonisation, his theories apply to the academia's decolonisation debates. Coloniality and higher education cannot be separated and must be understood from their historical roots in the West's project of colonialism. The necessity of decolonisation in academia is apparent as Africans have long had to fight the narrative that Africa has no knowledge to offer to the world. Ngugi wa Thiong'o clearly articulates the conundrum the African finds themselves under the conditions of coloniality:

> What should we do with the inherited colonial education system and the consciousness it necessarily inculcated in the African mind? What directions should

> an education system take in an Africa wishing to break with neo-colonialism? How does it want the "New Africans" to view themselves and their universe and from what base, Afrocentric or Eurocentric? What then are the materials they should be exposed to, and in what order and perspective? Who should be interpreting that material to them, an African or non-African? If African, what kind of African? One who has internalized the colonial world outlook or one attempting to break free from the inherited slave consciousness? (1986: 101 - 102)

The production of knowledge can either serve as a tool of liberation or domination (Freire, 1976) and for the African academic, the emergence of postcolonial theory has been a form of decolonisation and liberation. Postcolonial theory allows the colonized to question previously unquestionable social conditions and examines how one can "undo and redo the historical structures of knowledge production that are rooted in various histories and geographies of modernity." (Shome & Hegde, 2002: 250) By making the invisible visible, postcolonial theory and decolonisation give academics the tools to interrogate what is accepted as knowledge and examine the ways power and resistance come together in a bid to expand the horizons of academia. It is crucial to note the actual process of decolonising academic spaces is complicated by several factors. One major factor is the reality that educational institutions all over the world find themselves rooted in the global neoliberal and capitalist order. One cannot mention the period of African political decolonisation without mentioning the global neoliberal capitalist system that was created in its wake. As cliché as the saying might be, 'money is power' rings true because neoliberalism and capitalism have become the world's new colonising power.

> In other words, the completion of the decolonization process signalled the point of arrival of a new world hierarchization of the relations of domination—and the keys

> were firmly in the hands of the United States. The bitter and ferocious history of the first period of decolonization opened onto a second phase in which the army of command wielded its power less through military hardware and more through the dollar. (Hardt & Negri 2001: 246)

Scholars have shown that curriculums and institutions of higher educations have been impacted the invisible forces of neoliberalism. (Gyamera & Burke: 2018; Luckett, 2016). The genius of neoliberalism is that it hides behind "a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights, to hide the grim realities of the restoration or reconstitution of naked class power "(Harvey 2007: 119). The simple fact that African scholars do not have access to the world's wealth limits and shapes the work African academics can contribute towards the production of knowledge. In academia, the intersection of neoliberalism, coloniality, and modernity constitute an invisible power that continues to subjugate every aspect of the production of knowledge for the African.

> This not only affects individual staff and students but also institutions themselves who are compelled to compete in a global market of higher education that is increasingly stratified and marked by divisions. To be recognised as a global leader in the market of higher education demands particular forms of international legitimisation, often tied in with world league tables. Prestige in the market is distributed by narrow criteria produced through western-oriented, neoliberal and neocolonial perspectives of 'excellence' in the fields of teaching and research. (Gyamera & Burke: 2018: 453 – 454)

The neoliberal nature of Western academia means that academic institutions and universities are now run like businesses, so students are treated more like consumers and customers. In the business of selling degrees, students are more motivated by the material benefit or utility

of obtaining a degree in the job market than by the pursuit of knowledge to expand one's horizons. These conditions continue to silence the African voice in the production of knowledge. This has severe implications on knowledge production from Africa and the legacy of colonial education can continue as it privileges the knowledge of some while subjugating others. Research and scholarship about and from Africa are funded less often. African academics often face the risk of losing funding if their research doesn't conform to certain criteria. The expectations placed on teachers and faculty now have less to do with their ability to impart knowledge to their students but more to do with a statistical number based on their output of work published, conference papers presented, courses taught and the numerical scores of student evaluation ratings.

> Yet another example: universities today are large systems of authoritative control, standardization, gradation, accountancy, classification, credits, and penalties. We need to decolonize the systems of access and management insofar as they have turned higher education into a marketable product, rated, bought and sold by standard units, measured, counted and reduced to staple equivalence by impersonal, mechanical tests and therefore readily subject to statistical consistency, with numerical standards and units. We have to decolonize this because it is deterring students and teachers from a free pursuit of knowledge. It is substituting this goal of free pursuit of knowledge for another, the pursuit of credits. (Mbembe, 2016: 30).

Any discussion of the production of knowledge in Africa must make mention of the history and role of media institutions played during the colonial and post-colonial era. The fundamental issue with the media in Africa is its role as a function and perpetuation of coloniality and it is important to take a moment and analyse how media, knowledge and power all interact in the lives of Africans.

> Mass media institutions in Africa have their roots in the colonial era, when original institutional structures and intentions were to serve the interests of a few European settlers. The introduction and development of the mass media, especially the broadcasting institutions, were strongly influenced by European models, particularly the public service model. (Ndlela, 2009:56).

Several scholars have noted that during colonialism the function of the media was as a tool of subjugation, ideological manipulation and propaganda. (Bourgault, 1995, Chuma, 2010, Ndlela, 2009) To impose new rules and values the colonialisers used media as a "means to convince and influence people's minds and hearts. The press was one of the main arguments of seduction and dissemination of the colonial culture and information (Zaghlami, 2016 : 159). After the wave of African independence in the 1950s and 60s European governments, in an effort to maintain and expand their influence over its former colonies, used the news media as leverage. As such the media served as a powerful tool for the dissemination of information and ideology in the perpetuation of coloniality. Rather than nurture the revolutionary spirit of independence, western-educated African elites were quite comfortable using media institutions to maintain the status quo of colonialism (Bourgault, 1995). The mass media was "reduced to being purveyors of Western culture, their lifestyles, and celebrities, and carry very little content about developments taking place within Africa itself." (Ndlela, 2009:56) An article by Tawana Kupe (2005) argues that the modern media was an integral part of Europe's colonising mission in African and "newspapers, magazines, radio, television, film and the new media – did not originate in the African context." (Kupe: 2005) He argues it would be better to refer to 'media in Africa' rather than 'African media'. "Western paradigms are presented as standard, one-size-fits-all, and African situations are analysed from the perspective of how they fit into the existing models." (Chuma, 2010: 16)

From reporting, training and professional models, it seems that current media practices in Africa are basically a copy-paste of Western media institutions. As the primary model for all media, the West maintain power in a Foucauldian sense because it has been established as the normal and as such African media practitioners feel the need to emulate European styles in order to attain a certain standard instead of using the media in ways that are better suited to an African context. This has stunted what could have been a vibrant development of how the media can function in an African context. New ways of understanding the ways in which the media can serve to produce knowledge production from and about Africa is crucial. The necessity of decolonisation in African media space is apparent.

How do Africans regain access the intellectual, cultural and historical heritage that was subjugated by colonialism?

Scholars have recognized the capability of the subordinate classes to generate their owns forms of knowledge, as a way to counteract, interrogate and confront knowledge produced by those in power (Foucault, 1972, 2005; Said, 1978) For Ngugi wa Thiong'o the answer to this conundrum is the process of centring the African in the production of knowledge. He rejects the idea that the West is the centre of Africa's knowledge and places Africa at the centre of knowing for the African.

> Education is a means of knowledge about ourselves [...] After we have examined ourselves, we radiate outwards and discover peoples and worlds around us. With Africa at the centre of things, not existing as an appendix or a satellite of other countries and literatures, things must be seen from the African perspective [...] All

> other things are to be considered in their relevance to our situation and their contribution towards understanding ourselves. In suggesting this we are not rejecting other streams, especially the western stream. (1986: 150)

The implication of this is that the production of knowledge and the systems that produce it can be reviewed, revised and even rejected in favour of more comprehensive knowledge systems. That being said, this project is not a call to erase Western perspectives from the current systems of knowledge production but rather a call to widen the range of perspectives that inform the process of knowledge production. And by doing so we can place the African at the centre of knowledge production. This same thought needs to be echoed when it comes to the function of media in Africa. As professor Wallace Chuma puts it:

> African media and journalism educators need to relocate the African experience to the centre, rather than the periphery, of theorising on media. This entails a critical understanding of the dynamics of African citizens' experiences of the ordinary, of the nature of the postcolonial state and its role in public and private life, the nature of business and civil society. It entails an understanding of African history – before, during and after the colonial encounter. African languages, as part of the African experience, also need to be shifted to the centre of learning, teaching, and theorising on media and journalism. The same applies to African modes of self expression, storytelling, celebration – communication. Doing this does not alienate those aspects of Western thought that are relevant to African media and social systems. A paradigm reconstruction is about mainstreaming the African experience, and borrowing relevant Western models, but only where necessary to enrich the learning and teaching process. It is not about re-inventing the wheel, or de- linking, for that

> will be foolhardy. It is about charity beginning at home, and not next door. (Chuma, 2010: 17)

Ultimately I have found the struggle concerning knowledge production, media practices and the African to be about power. It is crucial to recognize how the dominance of Western discourse, scholarship, media practices and epistemologies have suppressed what could be an even more complete pursuit of knowledge. Producing knowledge can serve as a tool of liberation or as a tool of domination (Freire, 1976) and Africans can liberate themselves by centring Africa in the production of knowledge. For the purposes of this study, I will centre the African oral tradition in a bid to highlight the value that can be extracted from the African oral tradition and how we can use the media in a new way. This is act serves as a reclamation of power.

The significance of the African Oral Tradition

Due to the Western tradition of written scholarship, the lack of attention to the African oral tradition means that knowledge from that tradition has been widely unexplored. While the act of mediating knowledge through oral means may not be revolutionary, the possibility of extracting invaluable content from African stories, songs, legends, and proverbs must not be ignored. However, in the current state of knowledge production, what is considered valid knowledge and what is not means that African voices are silenced. We need to shift the ways we currently understand African oral storytelling from just a source of entertainment to a tool to communicate the community's knowledge and wisdom (Chinyowa, 2001). While the African oral tradition is a communal, participatory and entertaining experience (Wa Thiong'o 1986), African storytelling is pedagogical in nature and is used to awaken the community's creativity and imagination, offer guidelines to shape behaviours as well as train and sharpen the intellect of community members (Chinyowa, 2001). The performative and social nature

of African storytelling highlights the humanistic philosophy of African communities (Chinyowa, 2000). The congregation of people means the oral tradition creates spaces where people actively listen and participate in the sharing of ideas (Utley, 2008). In this environment, both the audience and the orator have roles and responsibilities (Utley, 2008). This mode of knowledge production is deeply rooted in the cultural practices of Africans which means the framework of it is grounded in an African paradigm (Carroll 2008). Especially because centred in the African paradigm are concepts of spirituality, morality, balance, rhythm, style, and expressiveness, communal interaction (Carroll 2008).

Many different types of stories are told, from the historical accounts of African life, the structure of kingdoms and their exploits, to stories of creation and how the world came to be and even simple parables about everyday life and ordinary objects that teach listeners moral lessons. In African communities, the function of unwritten songs, proverbs, conversations, and stories in the production of knowledge and information has been to pass the society's worldviews, values, norms and expectations from generation to generation. (Wa Thiong'o, 1986) This form of sharing knowledge serves many different purposes and is used as a way to highlight historical achievements, moral guidelines, belief systems while providing wisdom and advice (Wa Thiong'o 1986). By retelling their histories, pre-colonial African communities were able to establish their identities which in turn was used to rank themselves against the identities of other groups (Sumner, 1999). In this way, oral knowledge can be used to interrogate and rearrange positions of power within a society (Vambe, 2004).

As with all modes of knowledge, it is important to address the potential issues arise when accessing the oral tradition as a form of knowledge. As written forms of knowledge are the dominant form of preserving knowledge, African scholars have had to use the language and tools of Western knowledge in a bid to share the insights, content, and analysis gained from

the African oral tradition. The serious task of translation knowledge from one language to another has implications on the knowledge produced as a result of this process (Imbo, 2001; Wa Thiong'o 1986). Many factors are lost in the conversion of the oral tradition to a written one. Many aspects of the oral tradition were meant to be spoken, heard, performed and responded to and as such will perish if written down. A crucial component of the oral tradition is the symbolic use of sound, the relevance of which can not necessarily be translated in written form. Many African oral practices rely on these sounds, and they are meant to be heard as they can indicate joy, sadness, disgust, excitement, annoyance, among other feelings (Imbo, 2001). Perhaps unintentionally there is always a loss or addition when speech is being written from its oral form. Even more so when something is being translated from one language into another. Some interpreters may convey a completely different message than the one that was originally intended. This is made even more difficult by the fact that certain expressions, proverbs, words, ideas, symbols may not have an understandable equivalent in another language (Imbo, 2001). There are even more complications in the process of translation across cultures: from the skill of the interpreter to the number of languages involved in the process and much more (Imbo, 2001). The issues faced in trying to translate the African oral tradition to a written form can be viewed from two perspectives. First, the issues of translation may mean that the African oral tradition will remain an individual system of knowledge because if one cannot access the complete or even correct message the knowledge was supposed to convey, is it worth accessing? Or conversely one could take the view that African oral tradition need not be translated to a written form.

Bringing the African Oral Tradition to the 21st century

In recent years, the process of archiving and collecting samples of the African oral tradition has been led by academics in primarily in the Humanities. Typically, the process is carried out from an academic point of view and for academic purposes and kept in academic archives. (Civallero, 2017) However, that is not the best use of the African oral tradition and strips the practice of its true value. When the oral tradition is divorced from its original format and audience, it becomes a moment froze in time, to be documented and studied instead of the vibrant living tradition that creates a collective memory for both the storyteller and the audience. Scholars in the field of media studies can make use of the internet, new media and technology to revive the collaborative practice of the African oral tradition. (Civallero, 2017) This new digital horizon has changed the way information is shared and stored, how we experience culture, consume entertainment and receive education and the population's collective memory. It is critical that media studies scholars make use of the internet and the ever-evolving digital spaces and not be left behind. Now more than ever, digital spaces offer the perfect space for the African oral tradition to blossom with the advent of podcasts, digital radio, webcasts, zoom/skype conferences. These platforms offer new possibilities and new means of expression and in this way, academia can actively preserve and showcase the African Oral tradition as the valuable piece of human heritage that it is. With the recent developments in technology, we are now able to record the African oral tradition in the way they were meant to be performed and received whilst imagining new ways to experience it.

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

Advances in technology mean that audio can now be recorded and distributed with relative ease. However, the process of recording and preserving the African oral tradition is not being pursued to the fullest extent. In an attempt to encourage the celebration and preservation of an artform and system of knowledge that has been central to African identity, I created *An African Story (AAS)* which is a podcast that places a spotlight on the African oral tradition. The podcast aims to centre the African oral tradition as a system of knowledge in order to collect and preserve African knowledge while highlighting the brilliance of African stories and oral traditions. By engaging in the tradition of oral storytelling, *AAS* attempts to share knowledge in an African way that is not solely based on Eurocentric canons of knowledge by centre. In doing so, I hope to reclaim power and correct the racist narratives about the inability of Africans to produce valuable knowledge.

Format

An African Story is a combination of narrative storytelling, readings of literature, live storytelling and recorded interviews. Every episode focuses on a specific theme and is separated into individual acts. Every act in the episode is related to the grand theme. The themes for the episodes are as follows:

1. Introducing *An African Story*
2. African Names
3. Life, Death and the stuff in-between
4. Proverbs and Language

My personal motivations to do this project

My decision to make this podcast was born from my love of stories. At a young age, I recognized that if you listen to a person closely and for long enough, eventually they would tell you a story. I didn't have to look far to hear a story then as many members of my family are wonderful storytellers. One of my favourite storytellers is my Aunt Dzifa. Whether it is as her role as the informal family historian or in the way she uses a story to illustrate a point, her talent in telling a story is unmatched. My Aunt's stories would take me on an emotional journey with surprising twists and turns and ultimately leave me with a lesson to reflect on. Despite how much I tell her how skilled she is and valuable her storytelling is, my Aunt constantly laments that she wasn't blessed with intelligence because she didn't go to university. Even as a child, instinctively I knew that the problem wasn't her but that the skill she clearly has, isn't valued in the right way. There are a number of reasons for my decision to call this podcast an African Story. First, my entire aim in life is to get the world to listen to more African stories. Second, I wanted to do something to honour one of my role models, Chimananda Ngozi Adichie who highlighted "the danger of a single story " in a TEDx talk and explained how having a single narrative of a something can limit your understanding of it. Stories are the way in which I understand life and the story I constantly heard about the African oral tradition didn't make sense to me. Many people I spoke to complained about the notion our ancestors didn't write things down but somehow also neglected to recognize that the oral tradition is very much alive and well today. Or perhaps they did recognize it but didn't ascribe much value to it. To me, that has always felt wrong and every opportunity I get, I try to champion the excellence of African stories. One thing that drives me to create is my wish to see something exist in the world and I have been lucky that my academic work has given me several opportunities to do so. In terms of the idea to create a podcast specifically and not a documentary or putting on a live performance, I was inspired because

of my habit of listening to podcasts. The podcast that inspired the format of *AAS* is a weekly podcast called *This American Life (TAL)* hosted by radio personality Ira Glass. Every week the radio show chooses a theme and puts together stories that related to that theme. Every time I listened to TAL I was drawn in by the excellent storytelling but a large part of me longed to hear African stories told in the same format and with the same quality. So, when it came time to choose what to do for the creative project I jumped on the opportunity to make my African version of TAL. However, it was important to me that AAS not just be a copy of TAL but be rooted in proper research in a way that honours the excellence of the African oral tradition.

REFLECTION

The following section provides explanations and reflections on the stories I chose to be part of the project.

African Names

When the colonialists came to Africa they gave the Africans they encountered new names. This action disregarded the naming systems Africans already had in place. The parameters in place for naming in many African societies mean that names are not random or without meaning. Where many colonial names were simply labels that referred to a person, it is clear African names have "a strikingly semantic and semiotic load" (Bariki, 2009: 46) Scholars have found African names also have communicative functions. (Agyekum, 2006; Bariki, 2009; Suzman, 1994). "While western names are predictable, African names are generally not predictable, for until the child is born and under what circumstances it is born, the name cannot be determined with accuracy." (Agyekum, 2006: 208). The first episode I set out to do called 'African Names' was on the topic of names and naming traditions. I realized that

there was something special about the fact that every African person I met either had a story behind their name or knew the meaning of their name. I just didn't know why it was special, but I knew it was profound. In doing this episode I wanted to investigate why and therefore substantiate the special naming practices in African communities.

I began the episode with an Anansi story, a traditional Akan folktale from Ghana about a crafty spider man. Anansi stories are used to impart knowledge to the younger generations and teach them lessons about life. I chose the story called *Why All Stories Are Called Anansi Stories*. In the story, Anansi goes to Nyankupon - the chief of the gods- and asks him to allow that all future stories told by men be named after him. At the time all stories were called Nyankupon stories and it is said that Anansi was a very conceited spider, so he preferred that all stories be named after him. Nyankupon agrees but on the condition that Anansi fulfils three difficult tasks. Using his cleverness and wit, Anansi is able to do so and in the end, Nyankupon who was amazed by Anansi's fulfilment of the three conditions grants permission for all future tales to be called tales Anansi tales. I chose this story because gives a bit of insight into why things are named as they are in an African context. Anansi's cleverness and wit are what gave him the privilege of having stories named after him. I like to think the logic behind this is that if these stories are named after someone who is clever and wise, those who listen to these stories will also be clever and wise.

I also wanted to do an exploration of real-life African names and see what kind of stories I would find as the reasons why people were named as they were. I interviewed three people for this story I wanted to see if the names the interviewees were given had had any effects on

them in real life and whether they attributed value to their names. For me, these interviews were a clear indication of the importance of the act of giving a name.

The first interview I did was about Fola, a Yoruba friend of mine. The episode is called *Rich Names* because Yoruba names tend to be rich "not rich in wealth but rich in terms of meaning" as Fola put it. Yoruba people name their children exactly a week after they are born in a ceremony called Isomoloruko and it is a serious ceremony. This is evident in Fola's own name. I stumbled on the richness of his name in what could be called a happy accident. On the day of his birthday, his mother had sent him a WhatsApp message with all eight of his names and he decided that he would share them during his birthday dinner. A few days after the dinner I asked Fola if I could interview him about the meanings of his names and he happily obliged. During the interview, I was immediately struck by the sheer number and stories behind Fola's names but I was also struck by the fact that his last name was a proverb. The proverb roughly translated in English says – *if the owner of a house is alive, his house won't be overrun with weeds*. Fola explained the meaning to be that a good father would not allow his children to become riffraff and this proverb name was given to his great grandfather which speaks to the kind of father he was.

In the episode named *Wisdom and Knowledge*, I interviewed a young Zulu woman whose name Nolwazi means 'the one with knowledge'. Her middle name Khalipha means wisdom so in English. Nolawazi has a twin brother and essentially they have the same but the gendered equivalents of the names. The story Nolwazi tells about the giving of her name is that her father just wanted wise, intelligent and knowledgeable children and so he gave them these names. Their names are also inverted so where Nolwazi is Knowledge and Wisdom her

brother is Wisdom and Knowledge. I found this interesting as Nolwazi explained where they both were intellectually gifted: her brother in the sciences and she in the arts, making them almost like a yin to a yang. Another interesting thing this conversation brought up was the effect of not being called by one's proper name. As a young child, Nolwazi and her family moved to England where she found that people thought her name was too difficult to pronounce so everyone began to call her Nolly. She later explains how this had an effect on her confidence in her intelligence "I used to think I was really dumb actually " but later realized it was because people weren't calling by her true name. "I'm not stupid, actually my name says directly the opposite" she states later.

The final interview, *The Legacy Of A Name* was with a Kenyan man called Pius. Initially, when I set out to do this story I was looking for African people with English names. I have found that sometimes even when African people have English names they have clear meaning or are interesting/unusual. (e.g. - Perseverance, GodWin, Obedient, Blessing. *there seems to be a lot of Zimbabweans with names like this ha-ha). So initially I thought his name was *Pious* meaning devoutly religious because it is pronounced the same way but I was wrong. I really enjoyed the story he told me about his name. The tradition of naming in his community dictates that a child be named after the most recent elder to have died. Pius was named after his grandfather who passed on a year before he was. This is done as a form of remembrance and as he put it "the spirits give a child to replace one who was taken away". The idea is that the newborn baby would take the name, character traits, and conventions of the one who passed. To me, there is something mystical about making a name a legacy, in a way it allows the original name bearer to live for eternity.

At the end of my interviews, it was really hard for me to pinpoint and articulate why names were so important in relation to the African oral tradition and I'll never forget the moment everything clicked for me. During one of many conversations with my brother about AAS, he helped me break down the point of the story I was trying to tell by focusing on African names by pushing me to think deeply about the why of my focus on names in an oral society. In a wonderful moment of epiphany, I realized that my name Nana is a word that is *spoken* and thus becomes a vehicle to relay information. To break it down, while my name would still refer to me the person it is also multi-dimensional as words are one of the mediums used to convey information and knowledge in the oral tradition. I'll never forget the day I explained this aha moment to Fola and he said he hadn't ever thought of his name in that way and that it made him treasure his name a bit more. That's the reaction I want to get from my work. I want Africans to take a moment and think about the power the name holds. I want people to recognize the complexity and sophistication of the oral tradition and the value it adds to our lives every day.

Life Death and the Stuff In Between

All societies have concepts about how to move around this journey called life. With this episode, I wanted to explore some of the questions we all ask as humans. The episode focused on the stories told by Africans about Life, Death and the stuff in between. I tried to put together a collection of entertaining stories that gave a range of lessons, came from a variety of places and in a variety of formats. One thing that may be difficult to portray in writing is the magnitude of the brilliance contained in these stories as many aspects of the oral tradition were meant to be spoken, heard, performed and responded to.

1 The Sacred Story Of The Tree Of Life (South Africa)

This is a piece written by Credo Mutwa in his book *Indaba My Child* and tells a creation story of how the world came to. The process of recording and editing this story took a very long time. I recorded the audio several times and added many sound effects to make sure the story was engaging and interesting to listen to. I think it turned out quite nice so I'm quite happy. I chose this story because I enjoyed Mutwa's poetic descriptions and the way attributes in nature took on human characteristics. It describes how conflicts take place in nature and how humans came to inherit certain feelings like anger, lust, love. Despite this, I will admit one part of the story bothered me a bit. In one part of the story, a goddess called the Great Mother Ma finds her mate the Tree of Life quite unattractive. However, he forces himself on her and the Great Mother Ma flees from him terrified. I decided to keep the story in because ultimately it is described as a love story and is beautifully written.

2 The Upright Revolution: Or Why Humans Walk Upright (Kenya)

I found this wonderful story written by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o about the body and how humans came to walk upright. This story was full of wonderful imagery which makes it a great story to get lost in. The best part was the moral at the end. I found that moral stories are often layered with meaning and the way they use one story to tell another bigger story about life always excites me as a listener. In telling the story of the body Thiong'o makes it clear that no one part is greater than the other and the body's decision to work together is what makes it great. I found this recording of the story from Jalada Africa – a pan African writers collective. They embarked on a project to translate Thiong'o's story in as many languages as possible and so far has been translated into over 30 languages.

3 Learning The Corners: The Story Of Sekufo Seriba (Mali)

This story tells the tale of real-life griot Sekufo Seriba from the ancient West African Empire of Segu. I chose this story because it gave an example of storytelling told with a live audience, so we can hear the reactions of the crowd as he tells the story which is probably one of the best ways to participate in the oral tradition. The story is interesting to listen to and like the story before ends with a moral in the form of a proverb- *though the new broom sweeps well but the old broom knows the corners.* I also added music played by a living griot called Toumani Diabaté so the listener would be immersed in the story even more.

4 Lessons From An Uber Driver - The Story Of The Rich Man And His Son (Nigeria)

This might be my favourite story. I often have conversations with Uber drivers and have been told several amazing stories. One time I had an Uber driver reveal he used to be an opera singer and then he proceeded to sing a few beautiful songs. (*These wonderful conversations kept happening so I decided that I would make another podcast documenting some of the stories I heard from Uber drivers recorded with their permission. This is a personal project of my own.)

Anyway this time, I was speaking with an Igbo Uber driver and instantly his manner of speech drew me in with his vivid imagery and jokes. I asked if I could record him and he agreed. We began the conversation speaking about the stereotypes of different Nigerian tribes which got us talking about money because the stereotype about Igbo people is that they know how to make money. The best thing is I didn't even ask him to tell me a story but as we spoke he told me a story to illustrate a point he was making which was the story of the rich man and his son. The best thing about the story is it keeps you hooked because you

wonder why the father is doing what he does but it all becomes clear at the end. The Uber driver was such a skilled storyteller and in the recording, you hear my AHH moment of realisation. Again like the last two, there was a moral and he used this story to tell another. I'm so happy I was able to record it. I would have included the entire conversation because he gave a lot of valuable tips about humility and learning business from the ground up despite one's academic qualifications but for this project, I just wanted to focus on the oral story he told.

5 How Death Came To Earth (Uganda)

This Ugandan folktale was recorded by Home Team History. Although it is a story about how death came to the world it is actually a love story. Nambi who was the daughter of Gulu, the King of the Heavens, falls in love with a man named Kintu. To win her hand in marriage Kintu has to go through a number of tests that he does successfully and they are allowed to marry. I don't want to give away the twist but I found it interesting that across many folktales, love was a catalyst in either the arrival of life or of death. This folktale portrayed this occurrence quite well.

6 What Happens After Death: The Story of Uyinene Mrwetyana (South Africa)

This is a story I wrote after the brutal murder of UCT student Uyinene Mrwetyana. I was severely affected by her passing and I think this story came about as a way to pay my respects. My intention in adding this story to AAS was because I realized her death told us the story of living life as a woman in South Africa and gender based violence. It was my attempt to tell one story using another by using the single to tell a story of the many so at the end of the piece I interview a group of women to show how her death manifests in real life. I also tried to portray the concept of life after death or what happens in the lives of the living

once someone dies. Perhaps it doesn't fit so neatly in this collection of stories but I think it can be seen as an imagining of the future of the oral tradition. Using real-life situations as stories to tell bigger stories about life.

Proverbs and Language

For this episode, I wanted to explore the idea of verbal art forms. I wanted to highlight the art of conversation and the fascinating ways in which Africans use language and proverbs. The constraints of time and technical expertise on my part limited me to conducting interviews. However, I already know I would like to explore these topics further in the future as both these topics are quite big and could even have been the subject of their own creative project. In any case, both these conversations were a joy to have and I'm sure a joy to listen to. For the interview on proverbs, I spoke to Professor Francis Nyamnjoh who is a wonderful storyteller and he shared many insights on the role and wisdom of proverbs and their uses. He shared many proverbs and told a story about a skull. For the interview, I had a conversation with a UCT professor who is also a poet, Simphiwe Nolutshungu. We spoke about the difficulties in navigating the world both in English and your native tongue. He also shared a few proverbs, stories and a poem about education at the end. Chinua Achebe famously wrote, "proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten." (1958:5) and to show how tasty proverbs can be, I included a wonderful piece about Akan proverbs provided by the Yenkassa project.

Frustrations, changes and future plans

I ran into some frustrations while creating this podcast.

When I began the work of planning the format of AAS, I was quite ambitious and determined to produce at least 7 episodes however as I set out doing the working of researching and recording the episodes I found that I couldn't possibly achieve all my ideas

as a one-woman team in the time frame I was given so I had to cut down to 3 main themes and an introductory episode. The next time I try something like this I want to do it in a team because it is a lot of work for one person and I sometimes found that the quality of my audio suffered because I was more focused on the content of the audio. Given the chance to redo this project I would hire audio technicians and editors so I could focus on the formatting and stories. However, this is just the beginning of my work with the African oral tradition. I've always known my work would lead me to do projects about the African oral tradition. This project is just one of many in terms of my creative work with the oral tradition and I hope to establish a more comprehensive and quality collection as I proceed in life.

CONCLUSION

I began this project explaining the ways in which power, knowledge and the media have previously interacted in the subjugation of the African and their position in the world. There is no doubt that Africa is a continent that was ravaged by European colonialism which painted Africa as an uneducated and dark continent that had no history and no knowledge. By only acknowledging the validity of Eurocentric ways of knowing, the African is limited to a very small way of understanding themselves and experiencing the world. Ultimately, this project is a call to widen our epistemological landscapes by including African ways of knowing and media use. I hope that through this project I've highlighted the many insights and wisdom the African Oral tradition offers us and some of the ways we can use it to imagine a new possibility and openness about Africa. The production of knowledge can either serve as a tool of liberation or domination and I'm interested in liberating the African in me by telling and retelling the story of Africa using the African oral tradition. Using only Western paradigms to amplify African voices does not make sense. Now is the time to

centre Africa in knowledge production, in power, and media. At the end of the day, there is not anything I could write that could adequately express the value, wisdom, and vibrancy of the African oral tradition. You just have to hear it for yourself. So, I say dear friend, listen to an African Story.

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African Voices:Spiritual, Relaxing, Tribal - Music N'Chant Nguru - Sounds of Africa
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtrouhSprzA
Thabo Bopape reading the introduction story of Credo Mutwa's Indaba My Child

African Names

Introduction

Music used: Ohia BeYe Ya: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QM6QWnXHbC4
Story told: Why All Stories Are Called Anansi Stories

Act 1 - Rich Names

Music used: Fela Kuti - Water No Get Enemy
Interview with Fola Bolodeoku

Act 2 -Wisdom and Knowledge

Music used: Hugh Masekela – Thanayi
Interview with Nolwazi Nene

Act 3 - The Legacy of a Name

Music used: Kenya Benga Nostalgic 1970-1980 Mixtape Vol.1:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SN6azXLNeYM&t=9s
Interview with Pius Gumo

Outro

Music used: Highlife Classic Old School- Ghana:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5zycFeyqBE&t=1298s

Life Death and the Stuff In Between

1 The Sacred Story Of The Tree Of Life

Written by Credo Mutwa's Indaba My Child

Music used: African Music For Meditation I: Mbira-Balafon Inspirations: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1DtXj0Iot0

2 The Upright Revolution: Or Why Humans Walk Upright
Written by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o
Recording provided by Jalada Africa: https://jaladaafrica.org/2016/03/22/jalada-translation-issue-01-ngugi-wa-thiongo/
Read by: Wanjiku Mwaurah
Music used: African Music For Meditation I: Mbira-Balafon Inspirations: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1DtXj0Iot0

3 Learning The Corners: The Story Of Sekufo Seriba
Story told by Baba the Storyteller: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YueSWLem0Nc
Music used: Toumani Diabaté - Cantelowes live at El Real Alcazar
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=182&v=0DEKQjj6Ga0

4 Lessons From An Uber Driver - The Story Of The Rich Man And His Son
Story told to me by an Igbo Uber Driver
Music used: Ohia BeYe Ya: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QM6QWnXHbC4

5 How Death Came To Earth
Recording provided by HomeTeamHistory
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6 What Happens After Death: The Story of Uyinene Mrwetyana
Music used: Quiet Resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G_BrbhRrP6g

Proverbs and Language
Language
Interview with Professor Simphiwe Nolutshungu
Music Used: African Voices:Spiritual, Relaxing, Tribal - Music N'Chant Nguru - Sounds of Africa https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtrouhSprzA

Proverbs Interview
Interview with Professor Francis Nyamnjoh
Music used: Sona Jobarteh & Band - Kora Music from West Africa: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ig91Z0-rBfo

Akan Proverbs
Recording provided by the Yenkassa and Matey Kojo Odonkor, the Founding Director.