

Francis B.
Nyamnjoh

Prof Francis B. Nyamnjoh,
Department of Social
Anthropology, University
of Cape Town;
E-mail: nyamnjoh@
gmail.com; francis.
nyamnjoh@uct.ac.za

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Amos Tutuola as a quest hero for endogenous Africa: actively anglicising the Yoruba language and yorubanising the English language

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Introduction

Everything moves – people, things and ideas – in predictable and unpredictable ways. The circulation of things, ideas and people is not the monopoly of any particular group, community or society. Mobility and circulation lead to encounters of various forms, encounters that are (re)defining in myriad ways. If people, their things and their ideas circulate, it follows that their identities, personal or collective, move as well. And through encounters with others, mobile people are constantly having to navigate, negotiate, accommodate or reject difference (in things, ideas, practices and relations) in an open-ended manner that makes of them a permanent

work in progress. No mobility or interaction with others leaves anyone, anything or any idea indifferent, even if such interactions are not always equal and do not always result in immediate, palpable or tangible change. No encounter in mobility results in uncontested domination or total passivity. Even as some may wilt completely in the face of domination, some resist it fervently, and others are able to navigate and negotiate the tensions and contradictions brought about by the reality of domination in complex, creative and innovative ways. Sometimes this holds potential for new and more convivial forms of identity.

This is the framework I bring to my reflections on indigenous languages in Africa, their encounters, navigation and negotiation with colonial languages. I draw on *Drinking from the Cosmic Gourd: How Amos Tutuola Can Change Our Minds* (Nyamnjoh 2017), a book in which I discuss the writings of the late Amos Tutuola, a Nigerian writer who was mocked and dismissed by his fellow Nigerian writers for, among other things, his non-standard use of English.

In accepting a binary and exclusionary logic of civilisation, however, the writers dismissive of Tutuola missed the very point of his works. In his writings, Tutuola actively sought to yorubanise English and anglicise Yoruba, reflecting how Africans have never been passive in their embrace, internalisation, consumption and reproduction of European languages. His understanding of English is incomplete, but this does not diminish his ability as a Yoruba story teller with ambitions of reaching out and cultivating readership over and above his immediate Yoruba cultural context.

His deliberate effort to bring Yoruba and English into conversation exemplifies the conviviality of his life as a composite being always in the process of becoming – through encounters with fellow humans, and with nature and super-nature. In Tutuola's writings, Yoruba influences English and vice versa. One language and worldview mobilises another to make his storytelling intricate.

Tutuola repeatedly acknowledged that his English is borrowed, not to be mistaken for his message or used as a measure of his intelligence. Language to him is nothing more than a container, an envelope or a messenger, even if an active, lively and enlivening one. He cautions against dwelling on language at the risk of losing out on the contents or the message.

Long before encounters with Europe, Africans cultivated conviviality in and from encounters among indigenous languages. Hence the more appropriate term of endogenous languages. Endogenous is used here as an extension to the notion of indigenous, to evoke the dynamism, negotiability, adaptability and capacity for autonomy and interdependence, creativity and innovation in African societies, cultures and languages. It counters the widespread and

stubborn misrepresentation of African cultures and languages as static, bounded, vernacular and dialect. It counters the idea that African societies need the benevolence and enlightenment of colonial languages to aspire, compete and self-sustain as part of a civilised modern world. The term endogenous, more so than indigenous, reflects how for centuries Africans have Africanised European languages. They do not relent, even when colonising and postcolonial forces are bent on deleting, reformatting and installing a whole new linguistic software in the African mind and social imaginary.

Tutuola's quest for conviviality

This address explores how Tutuola successfully employed his creative imagination, in conversation with Yoruba folktales, to use and appropriate the English language. His stories activate himself and others to cope with the tensions and contradictions of colonial encounters.

Tutuola navigates between languages and worldviews, sharing African modes of thought in a colonial language. In a dynamic world of myriad encounters and agentive forces, he promotes conviviality between different traditions and generations of being and becoming African. He gives incompleteness a chance rather than embracing the extravagant illusion of completeness fuelled by spurious affirmations of superiority and autonomy. He speaks more to the logic of inclusion and less to that of exclusion and the violence of zero-sum games of conquest and conversion.

Tutuola felt the coloniser's language needed to be "altered sufficiently to bear the weight of an African creative aesthetic, infused with elements of the African literary tradition" (Achebe 2012: 55). He saw language and art as communication tools across social categories and worlds of unequal encounters. Tutuola stressed the need for conviviality between change and continuity, individual freedom and collective interest, tradition and modernity, Africa and the rest; conviviality between the world of physical appearances and that which does not easily lend itself to sensory perception in a straightforward manner. His writing poses a challenge to conventional assumptions about indigeneity and authenticity versus imports and hybridity, and forces us to rethink what really counts as 'indigenously African' in a dynamic manner.

Tutuola's intention was to ensure survival for his Yoruba culture and language by telling his stories in English. However, he was doggedly determined to think and write in English the way he would think, speak and write in Yoruba (Lindfors 1970, 1999a; Larson 2001: 1–25). This was a successful way of denying the English language and its universe of origin the victory it craved by seeking to transform

its African enthusiasts (Skulls à la The Complete Gentleman in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*) into complete gentlemen and complete ladies English style. To Steven Tobias, "Tutuola's use and manipulation of both language and the fantastic play pivotal and complementary roles in his formulation of a discourse of resistance" against the often deplorable dehumanisation to which he and his fellow Nigerians were subjected under British colonialism (Tobias 1999: 69). In this way, argues Tobias, Tutuola "turns the colonial power structure on its ear in an attempt to reclaim the center for himself and his culture" (Tobias 1999: 71).

A spanner in the pursuit of colonial modernity

Tutuola published his first two and most influential novels – *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954) – in the 1950s with one of the most prestigious literary publishers in London: Faber and Faber. The publisher did not overly interfere, editorially, with Tutuola's use of the English language, despite the fact of his modest formal schooling and his clearly imperfect mastery of the language and grammar in the eyes of purists. Many non-African readers (English and Americans in the main) were ambivalent but fascinated by Tutuola's young English and "unhinged imagination". Nigerians who had drunk profoundly from the wells of colonial education were angered, especially by the publication of his first book, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. "They had learned that dexterity in handling language was a necessity for a literary career, and they found Tutuola's critical reception befuddling" (Owomoyela 1997: 868).

These elites considered Tutuola a spanner in the pursuit of colonial modernity. Like his barely human Skull, who had ambitions of becoming The Complete Gentleman by borrowing body parts in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Tutuola, barely schooled in colonial education and its instances of legitimization, resorts to borrowing the English language of his colonisers to tell his tall Yoruba tales. Tutuola was considered as beneath human because of the perceived savageness of his mind and its primitive imagination by an African elite aspiring for full humanity by means of whitening up in the eyes of their European colonisers.

Such Africans, keen to bleach themselves culturally till they were virtually white, felt that Tutuola was pulling them down and back to the status of the bare or incomplete humanity of the dark caves of their dark continent that they were determined to escape.

To the colonially educated Nigerians, for Tutuola's publisher and European readers to display such open fascination with his exotic subject matter and his atrocious English grammar was nothing short of suspect (Lindfors 1975: xiii). The crystallising modern Nigerian elite were perplexed. They could not understand

how imperial Britain could expect to be taken seriously when on the one hand it presented itself as the model of perfection in civilizational pursuits, to be copied, mimicked and reproduced without question by its colonial subjects, while on the other hand, it continued to promote and display such fascination with the very same primitivism and savage superstitions, incompetence and underachievement that were supposedly a justification for Britain's initial colonial incursions with civilising pretensions.

The beauty and reality of incompleteness

As a winner takes all project, colonialism and colonial education encouraged the adoption of the *colonial language* in its purest authentication. In the case of Yorubaland and the rest of colonial Nigeria, this was English – which was generally perceived to be superior to the local languages, which were often referred to condescendingly as vernaculars and dialects of the colonised. The anthropologist and writer Okot p'Bitek introduces in his epic poem *Song of Lawino* (p'Bitek 1989[1966]), the colonially illiterate narrator Lawino. She, Lawino, has much in common with the barely colonially literate Tutuola and is treated in the same condescending manner by the “fully” or marginally better schooled Africans. The tendency was for schools to punish grammatically incorrect English such as Tutuola's. In certain cases, some overly enthusiastic converts adopted the colonial language in their families to the exclusion and detriment of their own mother tongues.

These preferences for colonial languages persist. Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, a 21st century Nigerian novelist, admitted in a BBC interview as recently as November 2016 how she grew up in a context where the English language was privileged to the detriment of her mother tongue, the Igbo language – so eloquently celebrated by Chinua Achebe in his sumptuous menus of proverbs. The Igbo language was banned at home and treated as a punishable offence if spoken at school. This fixation with colonial Eurocentrism is not confined to language as a vehicle. In the social sciences and humanities, just as in journalism and related worlds of storytelling, representations of Africa as a necessarily negative trope in the language of Eurocentric modernity perfected in the era of imperial imagination and conquest continue to be re-actualised in a manner that defies the very logic and science by which they are purportedly inspired.

The vast majority of African people continue to be sidestepped by a colonial and colonising education that pretends to be complete. Unlike the Skull in Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, who recognises the importance of interdependence through debt and indebtedness and insists on the need to acknowledge and pay one's debts, colonial education and the imposition of the

superiority of European languages portray themselves as being beyond debt and indebtedness. This attitude can only result in borrowing without acknowledgment and therefore pretending to be purer than these languages actually are. Such imperialist languages and cultures can only claim superiority by stubbornly and deafly insisting that their contacts with other languages and cultures are zero sum exercises of one-dimensional conquests and conversions, with little or no conversation, let alone creative borrowings for self-enhancement. Of course, the history of language dynamism belies any such pretensions.

The under-privileging of local African languages in favour of colonial languages has had the added detrimental effect of taking attention away from the cultures, worldviews, cosmologies and traditions of knowing and knowledge production that were developed and sustained in conversation with these languages for centuries prior to European colonisation. If Tutuola's stories are any indication, the universes represented by sidestepped endogenous languages are structured around the reality of incompleteness as a normal way of being and becoming. Such a reality is one that privileges interconnections and interdependencies, as well as an idea of power that is disabused of the illusion of permanence.

(Re-)appreciating African realities and forms of knowledge

An African literature shy of and embarrassed by its endogenous languages, and its mythical and folkloric past, even if this past was indeed barbaric and primitive, impoverishes itself. An uncritical and elitist embrace of the one-dimensionalism of colonial education in colonial languages and its palatability regimes serves to render invisible or peripheral dynamic popular modes of self-expression and meaning making that predated European colonialism.

African literature has much catching up to do with African musicians and filmmakers, who have embraced endogenous languages and popular articulations of reality in all their complexities. The popularity of their songs and films suggests that, indeed, there is no longer shame in telling stories, no matter how "backward" they may seem, and bringing into creative conversation African and colonial languages. Some filmmakers are comfortable going to their home villages to produce videos that disgruntle their African compatriots dazzled by the lure and allure of imperial modernity. If anything, Tutuola confidently teaches by example that Nigerians and Africans by extension "must not be ashamed of their old way of life, if they are to produce a literature worthy of their own aspirations" (Harold R. Collins, reprinted in Lindfors 1975a[1961]: 66-68).

In his quest to recognise and provide for interconnections and interdependencies in lieu of zero-sum games of winner takes all, Tutuola opts to bring Yoruba and

English into a conversation that is fruitful and enriching to him and the tasks he has at hand. He tells his stories in the ways he sees fit, drawing unapologetically on his rich cultural repertoire as a man of many worlds, local and distant, Nigerian and foreign, African and intercontinental.

Through his creative appropriation of Yoruba and English languages and cultural influences in his writings, Tutuola draws the attention of his reader to incompleteness, and to the need to recognise, cherish and draw on it as a strength. In this regard, dichotomisation between tradition and modernity, and between orality and the written word is highly problematic and misrepresentative of the full value of Tutuola's contribution as a frontier writer. He brought tradition and modernity, nature and culture, the natural and the supernatural, orality and the written, Africa and Europe into conversation in a manner that challenges the rigid thinking of evolutionary pretensions about human encounters and progress (Soyinka 1963; Barber 1995; Tobias 1999; Newell 2006: 71-72).

Tutuola was driven by his determination to keep the past alive and to protect his culture. He resisted being forced, in the name of completeness, to choose between the ways of others and the ways of his own people. "I don't want the past to die. I don't want our culture to vanish" (Tutuola interviewed by Mike Awoyinfa, quoted in Lindfors 1999b: 143). Tutuola did not allow his lack of higher formal education and sophistication in European literary styles and canons – his incompleteness, in other words – to stand in the way of his mission. "So far as I don't want our culture to fade away I don't mind about English grammar" (Tutuola interviewed by Mike Awoyinfa, quoted in Lindfors 1999b: 143).

Who validates and authenticates the level of one's education in order for one to tell one's own personal story or write about one's own society and cultural conventions? Should a writer's skills be judged by the ability to communicate in a second language or in the language of their birth and upbringing? The idea of an exogenously dictated level of education somewhat denies the likes of Tutuola the ambition of telling their stories, because they are bound to fall short of the level of completeness, competency or achievement expected for one to qualify as storyteller. It also denies a particular representation of their worlds and encounters with others that only they, with their background and experience, can make possible, however modest their level of formal education and whatever their mastery or lack thereof of the styles and canons dictated by the gendarmes of literary validation. For a sense of the type of scrutiny Tutuola's writings have had to go through in this regard, see Lindfors (1970, 1999a) and Larson (2001: 1-25).

Compared to Chief Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa, who wrote exclusively in Yoruba, and whose influence on Tutuola is undeniable (Lindfors 1970: 325-329; Cooper 1998: 42-44), by opting to share the same Yoruba stories with a wider

readership by writing in English, even if not an English sanctioned by England nor its Nigerian acolytes (Lindfors 1970: 331), Tutuola has probably brought more recognition and representation for Yoruba culture and folktales at the global marketplace of cultural production. In this connection, Abiola Irele, who considers Tutuola's novels as "an extension of Fagunwa's work in Yoruba" and as representing, albeit problematically, "a continuous progression from the indigenous to the European," has argued that "insofar as his language is the spontaneous recreation in English of the structures of the Yoruba language, which provides the linguistic and cultural framework of his imagination," Tutuola could be seen as an "unconscious artist" (Irele 2001: 17). Reluctance to see him as literary has led others to dismiss his work as "an 'aberrant' literary strain which represents a 'cul-de-sac in African literature'" (Neumarkt 1975[1971]: 188-189; Newell 2006: 186).

According to Yinka, Tutuola's son, these Nigerian critics of his father:

... took it upon themselves to defend the English language more than the English and the Americans combined, and refused to see anything good in the efforts of a semi-illiterate writer (by Western standards) but an undeniable professional raconteur (by Yoruba standards). To them anything, everything, must be judged, evaluated, and recommended only if they passed Western tests and standards. And that was a time when they were fighting Western colonialism, imperialism, culture, influence, you name it, through the writings of their novels, poems, etc.

Yinka adds that his father stood his ground, because he knew what he was doing.

Tutuola's writings as an archive on the future of endogenous languages

A closer look at the universe depicted by Tutuola suggests it has far more to offer Africa and the rest of the world than the one-dimensional logic of conquest and completeness championed by European imperialism and colonialism. Tutuola's universe is one in which economies of intimacy go hand in hand with a market economy, and where pleasure and work are expected to be carefully balanced, just as balance is expected between affluence and poverty, nature, culture and supernature. Tutuola draws on popular philosophies of life, personhood and agency in Africa, where the principle of inclusive humanity is celebrated as a matter of course, and the supremacy of reason and logic are not to be taken at face value. Collective success is emphasised, and individuals may not begin to consider themselves to have succeeded unless they can demonstrate the extent to which they have actively included intimate and even distant others. These

include family members and friends, fellow villagers and even fellow nationals and perfect strangers, depending on one's stature and networks.

Despite his unconventional English domesticated by his Yoruba syntax, modest and less than intellectual education in elite African terms, Tutuola has contributed significantly to the resilience of ways of life and worldviews that could easily have disappeared under the weight of extractive colonialism, globalisation and the market economy. His are stories of an accommodating resilience against a tendency towards metanarratives of superiority and conquest championed by the aggressive zero-sum games of the powerful. Tutuola's stories emphasise conviviality and interdependence, including between market and gift economies.

Tutuola's writing also serves as an *archive for endangered ways of life and of what is possible* in spite of colonialism and its zero-sum games of exclusive and exclusionary victories. Driven by his determination to keep the past alive and protect Yoruba culture, to resist being forced to choose between the ways of others and the ways of his own people, Tutuola did not allow his lack of higher formal education – his incompleteness – to stand in the way of his mission to preserve an African way of being human.

His desire to write was informed and justified by a deep unease with the blazing lights of colonial civilisation – lights as dazzling and blinding as the flood of light from one of his characters in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (Tutuola 1954), the Flash-Eyed Mother. Aware of the corrosive and infectious nature of colonial education, Tutuola felt he might have become a worse writer or not written at all had he embraced colonial education uncritically, or had he the opportunity to be duped completely and blunted by its pretensions. His imperfections in this connection were a blessing.

Tutuola had no pretensions to sophistication in the mother of all civilisations which colonial education was supposed to bring about. Because of the freedom this afforded him, Tutuola was able to write his books in a way that today offers Africans a rare window of opportunity to see how current asphyxiating and impoverishing epistemologies championed by reductionist Cartesian rationalism raised to an ideology could be enriched by complementary traditions of knowledge production, traditions initially disqualified and inferiorised under colonialism and its metanarratives of conquest.

Tutuola suggests ways for vulnerable Africans to challenge victimhood and assert their personalities. In his stories, very ordinary Africans are quite simply extraordinary in their capacity to challenge brutal and brutish games of power and conquest. Rich and poor are co-implicated and mutually entangled in Tutuola's universe of the elusiveness of completeness. His stories challenge the illusion of

the autonomous, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent individual, culture or civilisation, by inviting the reader to embrace and celebrate incompleteness as the normal order of being and of things. The stories suggest an epistemology of conviviality in which interdependencies are privileged and delusions of grandeur and completeness discouraged. Tutuola and his writings celebrate compositeness, the humility of incompleteness, and the potency of a language and its disposition for conviviality.

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