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# Beyond Representation and Translation: Intellectual Activism and the Language Question in African Literature

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### Abstract

What is African Literature? In what language(s) should it be written? As a scholar or student of African Literature from outside of the continent, what is/are the language(s) that he or she should study? This paper examines the critical debate on the language question in African literature, explores the intersections between discussions on language in literature and broader social, political, and educational problems experienced in “post”-colonial Africa, and compares the articulations of ideas on the issue across linguistic, social, historical and genre-based divisions. As literary critics, before thinking about thematic and linguistic questions in African literature, as one reads and studies certain texts, it is important to try to recognize the possible intellectual as well as activist intervention in the text, think comparatively as well as organically about the set of issues broached at different levels, and think about how to take actions accordingly in one’s own studies and writings.

**Keywords:** *Language, Activism, Knowledge production, Tradition, Liberation*

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## 1. Introduction

In his introduction to *Freedom and Socialism* (1968), alternately titled in Swahili as *Uhuru na Ujamaa*, Julius Kambarage Nyerere, the anti-colonial activist, political theorist, and former president of Tanzania made a deliberate attempt to explain the relationship between the Swahili word “ujamaa” and the English word “socialism”, and the choice of the word as a referent to the socialist policies of the country:

... [T]here was nothing accidental in our selection of the word ‘ujamaa’ to define our socialist policies; nor did this word result solely from the desire to find a Swahili equivalent for the word ‘socialism’. Swahili is a growing language and continues to incorporate foreign words into its vocabulary when necessary; indeed we talk of the policies of some other countries as being ‘kisoshalisti’. The word ‘ujamaa’ was chosen for special reasons. First, it is an African word and thus emphasizes the African-ness of the policies we intend to follow. Second, its literal meaning is ‘family-hood,’ so that it brings to the mind of our people the idea of mutual involvement in the family as we know it.

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By the use of the word ‘ujamaa’, therefore, we state that for us socialism involves building on the foundation of our past, and building also to our own design. We are not importing a foreign ideology into Tanzania and trying to smother our distinct social patterns with it. We have deliberately decided to grow, as a society, out of our own roots, but in a particular direction and towards a particular kind of objective. We are doing this by emphasizing certain characteristics of our traditional organization, and extending them so that they can embrace the possibilities of modern technology and enable us to meet the challenge of life in the twentieth century world.”

(28)

The conscientious choice and the belabored explanation associated with the use of the word “ujamaa”, in many ways, echoes the complex struggles that many activist writers and intellectuals from Africa have gone through in their choice of language and writing. Similar to Nyerere, who adopted the Swahili word to “domesticate” socialism, liberating it from former articulations in a non-African language, to affirm the implementation of a set of decolonization and social reform policies based on and through the attaining of a form of subjectivity rooted in Africa (both at the individual and the political level), it has been of the primary interests of numerous African writers and intellectuals to contribute to the promotion and achievement of individual and collective liberation through their act of writing and choice of language.

Key to the assertion of subjectivity is a deliberate act to cut off the ties with lingering problems emerging from colonialism that did not disappear with the formal conclusion of colonial administration, which, in the matters of writing, publication, and circulation, concern the nature and the quality of a form of prescriptive reading, interpretation, and criticism, that further alienates the piece of writing from its intended audience in Africa—a question that the renowned Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe discussed at length in his “Colonialist Criticism”. It is also over the means to achieve such an outcome that dissent between Chinua Achebe and Obi Wali following the 1962 Makerere conference of African writers of English expression arose. While Achebe sees the possibility of parallel development of national literature, written in the national languages, some of which may coincide with the languages of the former colonizers, and of the ethnic literatures written in the tribal languages of Africa, Obi Wali, considers composition in indigenous African languages as the only way to displace the centrality of a colonial gaze, and a literary circle as well as book market built on it.

Ngũgĩ Thiong’o’s evaluation of the situation a decade later, as documented in his *Decolonising the Mind*, proved the validity of Wali’s point, since it was indeed difficult to cut off the ties between African writers and the Western book market, and to strike a balance between the promotion and the publication of writings in European languages and writings in African languages, as long as writers continue to have the option to write in English et al. Yet, despite the sometimes uncritical reception and circulation of works from certain renowned writers like Chinua Achebe, in a Western literary market, these writings nevertheless gained relevance in a partially pan-African context by reaching writers and audiences from other African countries with the same former colonizer’s language/national language, or by gaining global or language-based transregional prominence. While this situation is to be partially explained by a combination of socio-political factors, both within and beyond the African continent, that did not support the total realization of ideas of liberation as stipulated by intellectuals in their different positions, lack of occasions to facilitate communications and understandings between intellectuals and writers rooted in different socio-political situations is also a contributing factor to the forced “alliances” between the circulation of the works of some writers and the new developments of literary movements and trends in the West. The temporal coincidence between the rise of a few globally celebrated African women writers and the developments of the feminist movements initiated in the West and its corresponding recognition in the United Nations, and the ambivalent ties between the literary circles in the West and a few politically active writers who sought refuge from domestic tensions in the West, may constitute two of the most notable examples of this.

However, the mere temporal agreement between Western intellectual and activist movements, and the publication and circulation of certain writers’ work in the West, does not cover the violence that occidentalism, consumption, and a capitalist book market may inflict on African writers, men or women; nor does it imply easy intellectual alignments between African writers and thematic trends in the West. As Ama Ata Aidoo, the Ghanaian women writer firmly asserts, concerning the contribution and impact of the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985), the general feminist movement has not done anything that African women writers and activists themselves would not have done, but to confirm their belief and conviction.<sup>1</sup> Bessie Head, a distinguished woman writer from South Africa and Botswana who published in English,

<sup>1</sup> These words are quoted from Ama Ata Aidoo from Flora Nwapa in an interview from G. Hull (ed), *Black Women Writers at Work* (US: Oldcastle, 1984), referred to in the introduction of Adeola James’s *In Their Own Voices: African Women Writers Talk* (J. Currey and Heinemann, 1990).

died in misery in 1986, ostensibly due to neglect and complications of payment from the publishers abroad,<sup>2</sup> disillusioned with both “exploitation” and “pseudo-scholarship” (James 5). Penina Mlama, one of the best known Tanzanian woman playwrights who chose to write for her immediate audience in Swahili, ended up not getting invited to many African writers’ conferences, even in other African countries, due to the limited readership she got and the disagreement of interests between the conference organizers (often the promoters of “the Achebes and the Soyinkas and the Ngugis”) and her act of writing (Mlama 76). Micere Githae Mugo, a Kenyan political activist and writer, and the co-author of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (together with Ngũgĩ’s Thiong’o), whose contribution has often been ignored or trivialized, also insinuated the disagreement between the message in Ngũgĩ’s writings (which were “very very dangerous”), and the decision that drove their publications through Heinemann, a publisher that took the risk because “they knew the books would sell” (Mugo 97). All these cases bear witness to the conflicting interests between African writers of English et. al., African writers of other languages and capital-driven publishers, and among African writers, all coming down to the essential questions of the meaning of liberation, its recognition and its practice under different conditions and contexts.

At the present moment, studies of African literature, especially, but not exclusively in the Western academy, continue to “suffer” from the tendency of categorization and distribution according to linguistic, thematic and methodological divisions, the existence of which may contradict the concerns of many activist African writers and intellectuals. On the other hand, many African indigenous languages are running the risk of extinction, due to the lack of support that the language users may enjoy to use their languages and to develop them into modern pieces of literature. In light of this situation, blind capital-driven efforts of linguistic documentations of the dying languages are not a sufficient solution to the problem if it clashes with the promotion of the well-being of the language users, whereas what is demanded from scholars and students of literature in the Western academy is a more thorough and engaged effort to decolonize our methodologies, to recognize the struggles and the concerns of African writers at different levels, to rethink the significance and the standard of scholarly expertise, and to make corresponding efforts as intellectual activists in our own writings and scholarships, built upon a critical understanding of our subjectivities and positions and the acknowledgement our limits.

In this essay, through reading across contextual and linguistic divisions, I analyze the extent to which, independent of thematic, linguistic, and generic divisions, many African writers have shown persistent thinking over the ways to ensure healthy and vital development of literary and artistic productions in African languages, which also cannot be separated from the writers’ own activist commitment, both intellectual and in practice, towards the provision of a solution to the ongoing social issues in the communities of their concern, taking in view the well-being of the people, especially the language users, in Africa. This type of commitment also begs the scholars and students to question their own agency and to think about the work they could do, in their research, that facilitates a fair redistribution and reconceptualization of knowledge in a way that not only corresponds to the efforts of the African writers, but also toward the construction of a general platform upon which the decolonization of knowledge production, in a way that may more effectively address ongoing issues of social inequality and oppression worldwide, may be more efficiently and productively discussed.

## 2. Subjectivity as a Problem of Language

The term “Négritude”, (or “Negritude” in English), is commonly used to denote a concept that affirms the quality of being from black Africa, usually attributed to a group of black intellectuals in Paris in the 1930s. In his essay, “Conscience Raciale et Révolution Sociale”, the Martinican poet and politician, Aimé Césaire introduces “négritude” as the coming-to-consciousness of the black subjectivity of the black people, the condition for liberation. Despite being an idea coined in French, Césaire makes a deliberate effort to associate the idea of “negritude” with a refreshed understanding of the idea of “language”, through the differentiation between the language of a white colonialist, and the language of a black colonial subject:

Des lors, s’il est vrai, que le philosophe révolutionnaire est celui qui élabore les techniques de libération, s’il est vrai que l’œuvre de la dialectique révolutionnaire est de détruire «toutes les perceptions fausses prodiguées aux hommes pour voiler leur servitude », ne devons-nous pas dénoncer l’endormeuse culture identifiatrice et placer sous les prisons qu’édifia pour nous le capitalisme blanc, chacune de nos valeurs raciales comme autant de bombes libératrices? Ils ont doc oublié le principal ceux qui disent au nègre de se révolter sans lui faire prendre

<sup>2</sup> This point is insinuated in the interviews conducted with Ama Ata Aidoo and Buchi Emecheta by Adeola James, collected in *In Their Own Voices: African Women Writers Talk* (J. Currey and Heinemann, 1990).

d'abord conscience de soi, sans lui dire qu'il est beau et bon et légitime d'être nègre.

Ils ont oublié de parler au nègre le seul langage qu'il puisse légitimement entendre puisque, différent en cela de « l'employé du bureau de M. Gradgrind », « l'esclave nègre » a le sang riche encore d'affections humaines et que c'est d'une affection humaine, comme le fait remarquer Chesterton, qu'il aimera la fidélité ou la liberté. La vérité est que ceux qui prêchent la révolte au nègre n'ont pas foi dans le nègre et que dans leur fierté d'être révolutionnaire, ils oublient qu'ils sont nègres, premièrement et toujours: esclavage encore et de la plus stérile espèce.

Therefore, if it is true, that the revolutionary philosopher is the one who develops the techniques of liberation, if it is true that the work of the revolutionary dialectic is to destroy "all the false perceptions lavished on men to veil their servitude", should we not denounce the sleepy culture of identification and place under the prisons that white capitalism built for us, each of our racial values as so many liberating bombs? They have mainly forgotten those who tell the black person to revolt without first making him aware of himself, without telling him that it is beautiful and good and legitimate to be a black person.

They forgot to speak to the black person the only language he can legitimately understand since, differing in this from "the clerk of Mr. Gradgrind's office", "the black slave" has blood still rich in human affection and that it is with a human affection, as Chesterton points out, that he will love loyalty or freedom. The truth is that those who preach revolt to the black person do not have faith in the black person and that in their pride in being revolutionary, they forget that they are black people, first and always: slavery again and of the most sterile kind.<sup>3</sup>

According to Césaire, to a black colonial subject, there are two different types of liberation based on its underlying motivation: one driven by spontaneity from one's experience and autonomous evaluation of reality, the other induced by the citizens of colonial France as corresponding to the general needs of the colonial society and its members. While this distinction in part reflects the hypocrisy of the colonial policy of assimilation,<sup>4</sup> which promising young elites from the colonies would realize only after extended studying and living experiences in the colonial metropolis, Césaire's appeal for self-awareness of the colonial subjects and alienation from the expectations of the colonial civilization encapsulates the essence of mental decolonization. His observation on the absence of a language to be easily shared between a colonial subject and the member of a colonial society, who often "forgot to speak ... the only language" that the colonial subject can "legitimately understand", also entails two fundamentally different understandings on language: that of language as a codified means of expression that is administered by social regulations and that may play a fundamental part in the determination of the social status of a human subject, and that of language generated through spontaneous acts of speaking according to one's contact with, and evaluation of reality. If, as the German philologist and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher pointed out in his essay "On the Different Methods of Translating" (1813) a bit over a century earlier, a translator's task is to bring together the "writer" and the "reader", and he or she has the choice of either leaving the "writer" in peace and moving the "reader" to the "writer", or leaving the "reader" in peace and moving the "writer" to the "reader", in a specific colonial linguistic encounter as identified by Césaire, there is no legitimate translation between the two forms of language he identifies, and "liberation" means a fundamental break from the linguistic logic of the colonial society and a reconstruction of reality and linguistic expression according to the standpoints of the colonial subject (Schleiermacher 49). In this context, a colonial subject's act of speaking and asserting his subjectivity is a political act that calls for a radical reform of one's mentality as well as the society that goes beyond the mediation of representation and translation.

Notwithstanding Césaire's attempt to alienate the idea of "negritude" from any colonial language, French in particular, and his persistent effort to point at the specific colonial dynamics at work and the complicity of capitalist knowledge production in reinforcing the cultural imperialism in place, instead of elaborating the idea based on any form of essentialized racism, the idea, as documented and circulated in French within a primarily francophone context, impossible to be free from its colonial cultural underpinnings, brings about additional difficulties in the proper recognition and acceptance of its intellectual merit by African writers and black writers from a different context. As Obiajunwa Wali observes, the 1962 Conference of African Writers of English Expression marks the "climax of the attack on the Negritude school of Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire", a position already previously taken by renowned African writers in English like Ezekiel Mphahlele, Wole Soyinka and Christopher Okigbo (Wali 330). The main reason for its rejection concerns precisely the formalistic prestige it bears and its inseparable involvement with the intricately intertwined politics of colonialism at the time. Mphahlele, in his "Negritude - A Reply", presented at the University of Dakar in 1963 in a conference on "African

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this essay are mine.

<sup>4</sup> The policy that ostensibly aims at making people from the colonies citizens of the colonial nation by providing them quality education in the colonial language, often associated directly to the Francophone context.

Literature and the University Curriculum” a few years after Senegal’s independence, eloquently lays out his objection to “negritude” at no less than four levels. First of all, drawing from the exemplary experiences of people fighting against nonchalant colonialists who refuse to be “liberated” and withhold their supremacy from places like apartheid South Africa and the segregated areas in Brazzaville Congo, he points out that many black people in Africa are obliged to fight for both their humanity and their dignity through active reconciliation of “the Western and the African” in them. They do not need to be told to know the value of their African culture, and they have already been actively resisting Western imperialism in all possible forms according to the specificities of each circumstance. Secondly, Mphahlele is also against a “romanticized” vision of Africa and the Africans as inherent in the notion of “negritude”, and together with it, Western as well as white expectations of an African reality that is not rooted in black African experience in each context. While “negritude” as a concept is also born of the one’s realization to not satisfy a Western gaze or expectation, as a literary movement, to Mphahlele’s evaluation, it entails thematic and stylistic principles that are still nevertheless derived from, and responsive to, the Western literary field. As a consequence, it prioritizes once more the presence of a master’s gaze and a colonial culture that should have already been displaced in newly independent African countries. With the remark that “we should not allow ourselves to be bullied at gunpoint into producing literature that is supposed to contain a *négritude* theme and style”, he alerts the extent to which the literary movement might be acquiring a status commensurate with parallel literary movements in a colonial culture, which dictates formalist principles without acknowledging and engaging the reality in place. Thirdly, Mphahlele also brings up his reservation with the uncritical acknowledgment and treatment of one’s colonial bearing, the privileges and the entrapment it comes with, of the promoters of “negritude”, which culminates in the concluding contradiction between “negritude” expectations and the Anglophone colonial experience that he brings up. In the absence of a parallel assimilation policy that encourages the disavowal of the colonial subject’s own racial and cultural identity, colonial subjects under the British empire are not bothered as much with the preservation of their culture as with the colonizers’ obsession with exoticism favored under a different form of colonial governance. As such, an act of resistance in response to one form of colonial experience may serve the colonial purpose in a different setting, not to mention the seemingly unbreakable tie between the idea and the socio-material configuration of the colonial language and its culture. It is for this reason that Soyinka, in an early essay of his, titled “The Future of West African Writing”, published in *The Horn* in 1960, makes the controversial claim that Chinua Achebe is a more “African” writer than Léopold Senghor, accusing the latter of intentionally accommodating to Western literary conventions while applauding the former for his indifferent attitude towards Western culture.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Mphahlele also raises his suspicions at an easily established, and often taken-for-granted solidarity and commonality between black people from the African continent and black people from the diaspora, which both the term “negritude” itself and its circulation may suggest, by pointing out the possibility of different political interests that one may be obliged to align with to achieve one’s liberation within a specific national or regional context. The Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo declined the first prize in poetry of the First World Festival of Negro Arts that was awarded to him in 1965 precisely due to his disbelief of a fundamental common ground that underwrites the literary identity of all black people.

Nevertheless, Senghor’s approach to “negritude”, both as a political concept and as a literary movement, is more complex and nuanced, and entails his ideal for liberation at a higher, universal level. In his essay, “Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century”,<sup>6</sup> Senghor attempts another definition of “negritude” as “the sum of the cultural values of the black world” which is also at the same time “a certain active presence in the world, or better, in the universe” (180). This definition, which is introduced following his observation of the assertion of cultural and linguistic difference made by ethnologists and sociologists of the time, is not intended as a response to, or direct engagement with, expectations from the Western societies at a same level, both culturally and scientifically, but rather posits the act of “rooting oneself in one self” and being in active relation to the world, by part of all black African people and people of African descent, as the generating force of a new universal culture that, as a byproduct, would also correct the wrongs of the Western culture and frees it from its imperial underpinning. It is an idea that has in view the multiplicity of ways of being from the black world, and that is designed to liberate cultural and intellectual expressions from its colonial utterances. Hence, Senghor’s avoidance of a direct attack of Western modern ontology in his article does not suggest a total submission to Western epistemology and forms of scientific articulation, negating at the same time the epistemic violence that may take place simultaneously. His ambition is toward a viable form of cultural liberation that effectively connects affirmations of

<sup>5</sup> It is here that Soyinka makes the famous claim that “[t]he duiker will not paint ‘duiker’ on his beautiful back to proclaim duikeritude; you’ll know him by his elegant leap” and that “[t]he less self-conscious the African is, and the more innately his individual qualities appear in his writing, the more seriously he will be taken as an artist of exciting dignity.” (quoted from Bernth Lindfors’s *Early Nigerian Literature*, 140).

<sup>6</sup> Collected in *The African Reader: Independent Africa* (1970), edited by Wilfred Carty and Martin Kilson. The editors did not identify the source of the essay.

the African realities to the realities in the rest of the world, in a manner that is not only not dictated by Western expectations, but also not confined within a specific African context.

Following this bifurcated presence of African subjectivity, Senghor also discusses the relevance of the language question to the idea of “negritude” in two different ways. On the one hand, by suggesting the translatability between “negritude” and “African personality”, as already belabored by some “English-speaking Africans”, and “black personality” as proclaimed by the American New Negro movement, Senghor attributes a pan-African quality to the idea that may be established through the active intellectual efforts drawing similarities from different forms of linguistic articulations across a diverge range of contexts. On the other hand, his inquiry and elaboration of the lack of equivalence to the Western notions of “spirit” and “matter” in the Wolof language also reveal the potential of indigenous African forms of knowing, embedded in the African languages, in contributing to a better and more comprehensive worldview that modern Western culture is unable to provide. Notwithstanding its seemingly unrealistic utopian underpinning, which is also reflected in his political ideal of federalism as well as the numerous questionings and objections from other African politicians and intellectuals concerning his bourgeois tendency and his francophilia that further distances him from the African reality, his mode of reasoning nevertheless embodies an intellectual possibility of conceptual liberation and a universally decolonized means of knowledge production that perhaps only fails to concretize because of the absence of a corresponding material reality that can secure its practice.

In the sections that follow, I juxtapose and analyze a few different positions and choices made concerning the use of language in the composition of African literature across linguistic and socio-historical contexts, to show the extent to which the writers have share similar concerns over the language question and subjectivity in African literature and knowledge production, despite the different path they follow according to the specificities of circumstances they faced.

### 3. The Language Question as Reflected in Writing

1) **The Makerere Debate and Perceptions of Language:** As writers at the Makerere conference contested the relevance of “négritude” both to African writing in the English language, and to African literature in general, they were also in dispute over the definition, the scope, the identity, the language, and the ownership of African literature.<sup>7</sup> While the different positions taken concerning the questions at hand reflect the complexity of the historical reality, as well as the breadth of scope of questions on the cultural identity and configuration of a whole continent, a persistent intellectual commitment to the meaning of decolonization and ways to make peace with a colonial past experienced in each specific context, can be traced behind the thoughts of many thinkers and writers, irrespective of their specific views and positions at surface level. A close examination of Obiajunwa Wali’s “The Dead End of African Literature”, published in *Transition* in 1963, and Chinua Achebe’s “English and the African Writer”, published in the same journal in 1965, shows that the famous disagreement between the two writers over the question of language in African literature concerns less a question of language per se than a viable and practical means to achieve intellectual independence in African cultural and knowledge production. Wali’s controversial yet thought-provoking claim that “the uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing is misdirected, and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture”, and that “until these writers and their Western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they are merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity, and frustration”, shows his disillusionment at the prospects of the development of African literature in African languages, and of the achievement of complete decolonization of the mind, if writers continue to have the option of writing in European languages (333). At the practical level, he also does not see any possibility of a parallel and equitable development of literature in African languages and literature in European languages, as he contemplates the meaning of “transliteration” from an African language into a European language. His remark that “[t]he question of transliteration, whatever that means, is as unwise as it is unacceptable, for the ‘original’ which is spoken here is the real stuff of literature and the imagination and must not be discarded in favor of a copy” exposes the lack of equal status between African languages and colonial languages, as a result of which the transport of thoughts and expressions from indigenous African languages to a more prestigious European language only enriches the European language and enhances its privilege, at the expense of the indigenous language (333). This point is strengthened with another observation later in the essay that “literature ... is the exploitation of the possibilities of language”, which in the African context, means that intellectual energy should be directed at the development of the African languages rather than the contribution of a worthy addition to the already developed European colonial languages (333). As Wali also draws attention to the

<sup>7</sup> See Chinua Achebe’s “English and the African Literature” in *Transition No. 75/76, The Anniversary Issue: Selections from Transition, 1961-1976 (1997)*, pp. 342-349.

presence of a literary network established upon a specific colonial language and rooted still in a colonial metropolis, which African writers who continue to write in the colonial languages will not be able to break away from, the question becomes more complicated. Therefore, to Wali, the action of writing in the indigenous language that the African writer knows constitutes the only possibility of ensuring the intellectual independence of African writers as well as elevating the status and the prestige of the African languages.

Chinua Achebe's view on the same question, as suggested in his essay "English and the African Writer", is comparable to Senghor's view on "negritude" in that both writers conceive of an African contribution to a worldwide community in terms of literary composition and knowledge production that is, on the one hand, more intellectually demanding, and on the other hand, requires material correspondence that may be difficult to meet. His insistence on the legitimacy of African writings in languages like English and French does not suggest his lack of awareness of the political implications behind it. However, it is also not fair to completely discredit and disavow the colonial experience in each specific context, and disregard the fact that the languages of the former colonizers continue to be impactful to many African nations, in the form of national languages that ensure national unity. To many people in Africa, the use of these languages already constitutes part of the authentic African experience at the time, and this is a reality that needs to be acknowledged. In this sense, African literature written in the language of the former colonizers does not necessarily serve only to enrich the language and literature of the colonizers, but first and foremost embodies an authentic African reality and cultural identity, and then extends a conversation to a worldwide community. There is a level of compromise that the author may have to reach to secure the "authenticity" of an African context in the use of these non-indigenous languages without making them unintelligible to a wider community of language users, but it does not mean succumbing to the conventional literary and linguistic practices in the colonial metropolis, or conflicting with the parallel development of the "ethnic literatures" of each country (343). As he puts, "my answer to the question, 'Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing?' is certainly, 'Yes.' ... 'Can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker?' I should say, 'I hope not.'" (347). Accordingly, the idea of African literature should also be defined in a way that duly captures the plurality of the languages involved and the complexity of the situation, instead of being crammed "into a small, neat definition" (343). As he puts it, African literature is not "one unit", but "a group of associated units", or "the sum total of all the national and ethnic literatures of Africa", the inclusion of African writings in the languages of the former colonizers may instead lead to a challenge to a preconceived notion of cultural identity associated to the term "African literature" as also originated and transmitted through a modern European language (343).

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, two decades later, in *Decolonising the Mind*, revisits the language question of African literature and makes a claim, comparable to that of Wali's, in support of writing exclusively in indigenous African languages. Notwithstanding the complex structure of the text as well as the rich perspectives it draws from, his conclusion is drawn primarily in consideration of the intricate relationship between colonial history and the linguistic situation(s) in many parts of Africa, as well as the relevance of the problem to the then present political situation in Africa. When a writer's knowledge of, and proficiency in a language of the former colonizer comes together with the colonial violence and the consequential disfigurement of the society as well as people's mentality as a whole, it is hard to maintain an idealistic view of peaceful parallel coexistence between the national language and the ethnic languages. On the other hand, the then-contemporary socio-political reality, which continued to alienate the colonial-language-speaking-elites from the indigenous-language-speaking peasants and working-class people, also demands the writers, as intellectual activists, to seek to write in the African languages in the hope of awakening the political consciousness of the peasantry and to keep up the struggles against colonialism and imperialism in light of the new political situations.

With his primary concern being on the then-contemporary political situation in Kenya, and the general situation of lack of literary compositions and publications of literature in African languages across the continent, Ngũgĩ, in this book, does not further elaborate on the comparability between an African language and a colonial European language like English, nor does he go further to challenge the implication of the continued sustaining of English in its current form, a question that Njabulo Ndebele elaborates on according to the situation in South Africa. In "The English Language and Social Change in South Africa", a keynote lecture he delivered at the Jubilee Conference at the English Academy of Southern Africa in 1986, Ndebele fashions insightful yet biting critique of the institutional sustaining of the configuration of the English language and its connections to on-going forms of oppression and social inequality that takes place in South Africa at the time. Commenting on the contradictions between renowned thinkers' claims of English's globality, its increasing relevance to the needs of numerous populations whose first language is not English, its state of evolution beyond the control of the native speakers, and metropolitan English-speaking policy makers' efforts to administer the use and education of the English language for the preservation of the privileges of the English-speaking metropolitan elites instead of the needs of those compelled to take up English for their purposes, Ndebele exposes the extent to which

dominance may continue to be exerted through the institutionalization of good English in the seemingly benevolent form of helping non-native-English speakers ameliorate their level of proficiency. In its place, he calls for the need of radical activist thinking that would alter the direction of the administrative practices and the distribution of resources towards the interests of the exploited, which more specifically to the question of language, the construction of a new national language of South Africa that opens up English's possibility to become a different language, independent from the Commonwealth, that serves the need of South African people on an equal footing irrespective of their former proficiency in the language.

Concretely, Ndebele lays out a few imagined eventualities of the new South African national language. Firstly, it may effectively merge English with the indigenous languages encountered in South Africa not only at the level of vocabulary, but also grammatically. Secondly, the instruction of English in educational institutions should be decolonized in a way that ensures the equality of students of different backgrounds and that does not privilege the experience of certain demographic students over the others. It should also be distanced from "the functional instruction of corporate English" (13). Thirdly, one should maintain a critical awareness of the difference between the acquisition of language and the acquisition of knowledge, with no single language, especially English, being put in a position to bear the totality of human knowledge and wisdom. And fourthly, one should also make the crucial differentiation between English as a language in and by itself, comparable to indigenous languages in South Africa, and the aspects that tie it to manipulative interest. In this way, Ndebele illustrates the work that needs to be done for English to genuinely serve as a national language in a democratic society, and the difficulties ahead, in a general context still dominated by white capitalism and imperialism brutally manifests itself, for which the administration and management of English are complicit.

From the analysis above, it can be seen that notwithstanding the specificities in each historical and linguistic context, discussions on the language question in African literature by the writers who happen to use the English language do not essentially disagree in spirit with the Negritude writers and thinkers. The dissent, however, often concerns the continued mistreatment of the African subjective intervention in writing, in the transmission and distribution of the texts through a process not fully exempt from colonial influence, and the uncritically privileged position a certain idea may be placed in a society that is still not fully democratized. As I hope to show in the next section, this problem is centrally addressed in Werewere Liking's *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* ("It shall be of Jasper and Coral"), and her trajectory as an activist artist may inspire more productive thinking over the seemingly unstoppable interplay between the form and the content of that often features in a piece of activist literature still obliged to be communicated through a colonial language.

**2) *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* and the Superimposition over a Colonial Language:** The work of Werewere Liking, a writer, playwright, and performance artist born in Cameroon and based in Côte d'Ivoire, offers an intricate perspective into ways to merge African and indigenous-knowledge-based subjectivity with colonial literary heritage as well as activist work towards the preservation and development of indigenous languages and forms of art<sup>8</sup>. In this section, I discuss her work as a writer, artist, and intellectual and social activist, as relevant to the language question in African literature, by way of an interpretation of her multifaceted "chant-roman" ("song-novel"), *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail: Journal d'une Misovire* ("It shall be of jasper and coral: Journal of a Misovire), first published in 1983. Despite written in French, the work secures the subjectivity of an African writer through the writer's deliberate effort to overturn the logic of French (and European languages in general) both at the level of the language itself, and at the level of its relevance to a local African experience that is also weaved together with a gendered dynamic. As is reflected in the word "misovire" – "man-hater", from the title of the book, which Liking creates as a counterpart of "misogyny" by merging the Greek root "miso-" (which means "hatred" or "hater") with the Latin root "vir-" (which refers to "man"), the absence of a word like "misovire" in the presence of a word like "misogyny" signals the exclusionary quality of French and other comparable European languages that are centered around a male-oriented-subjectivity. Stamping the work as a "journal" of a "misovire", in this way, pronounces the subjectivity of the work in a way that not only points to a form of existence that heretofore was not properly represented in writing, but also challenges the existing order of things that the language of composition embodies. The juxtaposition of the lyrical part of the title "It shall be of jasper and coral" with the logical part, "Journal of a Misovire" that characterizes the nature of the writing, corresponds with the idea of "chant-roman" that the writer uses to characterize the genre of the work. In this way, the orality of indigenous forms of African expressions is fundamental to the intended reading experience of the work, which at the same time also integrates a logical intervention intended toward the French language and the discourses it sustains and transmits.

The theme of the perception of language prevails throughout the work. By labeling the foreword of the work "Avant Verbe", instead of the ordinary French term for "foreword" – "avant-propos", the author's intention to attribute a new logic and order for the French language in a way that denotes the active oral quality of African language is clear from the very beginning:

<sup>8</sup> For more information on Werewere Liking and her work, see Irène Assiba d'Almeida's "Introduction: Werewere Liking: a deeply original voice" in Werewere Liking, *It shall be of jasper and coral and Love-across-a-hundred-lives* (2000).



«L’Afrique noire est mal partie»

«L’Afrique étranglée»

«L’Afrique en danger»

«L’Afrique trahie...»

Les Dumont. Les Dupart. Et autres De Baleine...

Des titres. Des noms. Des bilans. Des prophéties...

Des mots pour dire l’Afrique gangrenée et prédire les temps où il n’y aura plus à manger que des criquets migrateurs, et à la bonne saison encore!!!! Pour dire que «l’Afrique colonisée n’avait pas d’avenir et l’Afrique indépendante va mourir»... etc ... etc... C’est peut-être vrai tout ça. Mais il y a d’autres vérités. Certainement...

Dans ce texte, jouons.

Jouons à accumuler toutes les faiblesses les blocages les placages les laideurs et les velléités. Superposons. Entassons. Mélangeons. Ça ne va pas loin certes. Mais c’est un jeu. Voilà: La parole n’a plus de sens. Le regard, le plaisir, l’amitié sont figés dans le mitigé. Les désirs originels sont pervertis. Les intellectuels sont creux et vasouillards. Les hommes tremblent dans leurs bourses et les femmes sont de la vraie merde. Les vieillards sont pourris les enfants contaminés et l’on n’a plus ou l’on n’a pas encore trouvé un système d’éducation capable de revaloriser le niveau...

(7-8)

“False Start in Africa”

“Stranglehold on Africa”

“Africa in Danger”

“Africa Betrayed...”

The Dumonts. The Duparcs. And other De Baleines....

Titles. Names. Assessments. Prophecies.

Words that express a gangrenous Africa and foretell times when there will be nothing left to eat but migratory locusts, and that only in the good season!!!! Words that express that “colonized Africa never did have a future and that independent Africa is going to die” ... and so on... and so forth.... All that may well be true. But there are other truths. Certainly....

Let’s play here, in this text.

Let’s play a game in which we amass every weakness every blockage every veneer every bit of ugliness and every stray impulse. Let’s superimpose. Let’s pile it up. It won’t go very far that’s for sure. But it’s only a game. There it is: the word no longer has any meaning. Looks, pleasure, friendship are congealed in ambivalence. Original desires have become perverted. Intellectuals are hollow and muddle-headed. Men have no balls and women are real shitfaces. Old people are decayed, children contaminated, and an educational system capable of stabilizing the standards no longer exists or has not yet been found ...<sup>9</sup>

(3)

Directly challenging the claims and affirmations made about Africa from perceptions of outsiders and transmitted via the French language, this opening asserts the room for an alternative account of truth from within Africa. Multiple interpretations can be fashioned over Liking’s appeal for game playing in the text. It may refer to the unbreakable linkage between serious text-based knowledge expressed in acceptable linguistic orders and the ongoing forms of imperialism that may continue to encroach the subjectivity of an African, to the extent that only a not-so-serious “game” may provide an opportunity for actual autonomous thinking. It may allude to the oral, musical, and performative aspect of the work that is deeply rooted in the orality of African expressions, also matched by the writer’s syntactic and stylistic interventions, which create a rhythmic and melodious reading experience corresponding to the genre of a “song-novel”. It may also bear the author’s concern over a decolonized means of instruction by inviting the readers into a form of inquiry and a mode of thinking that does not belong to an “education system” with “stabilized standards”, and that

<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise noted, translation from this work comes from Marjolijn de Jager’s translation, published by the University Press of Virginia in 2000.

takes boldly viewing the world upside down as a point of departure, which will lead to a fully liberated mind in the presence of suffocating accounts over one's being that does not leave room for original intervention. It is on this note that the two male characters, Grozi and Babou, together with their not-fully-liberated intellectual ventures, are introduced.

The dynamic co-existence of Grozi and Babou, which came into the mind of the "misovire" narrator as she tries to find out whom to dedicate her writing to, epitomizes the dialectic extremes between the "intellect" and the "emotion" as they each strive for at least an imagined mental relief from their problematic lives in Lunaï: "Grozi and Babou they're a specimen of those accursed couples that haunt Lunaï. As prisoners of time they met here again irresistibly inescapably because of the debts they contracted toward each other and the web their emotions had inextricably woven ... "(8). Babou is thereby introduced as a person totally consumed into the material world, not being able to imagine a viable alternative outside of his living condition other than through the images provided to him by the media. Whenever he wants to escape from his poverty-stricken life, he would dream that "he's robbing a bank right under the nose of a cop who sees nothing not even his fingerprints" with all the imagery details provided to him by the media which he is now free to arrange "in any way he chooses" due to the equality and freedom fought by his ancestors (8-9). Grozi, on the other hand, is caught in between the binary of his awareness of the spirit of his ancestors and his ordinary life governed by colonial reason and logic, and finds himself in a difficult position of playing "double of nothing" for his needs of "what is concrete secure":

[I] se décrète cartésien commet des thèses sur la raison et en perd sa langue maternelle... Il négocie des accords bétons-bombes-gestion-guerre-génocide-pouvoir-pétrodollars... Il recrée le monde Grozi sa bourgeoisie-balourde. Son prolétariat-populaire-à-la-langue-de-Moussa. Ses intellectuels-girouettes-Est-Ouest-Experts-paraphraseurs. Ses politiques-politiciens-fantoches. Du solide-concret quitte à passer pour un vendu aux «gens de raison» un faux Blanc en somme et ça le vexe...

(16)

[H]e declares himself a Cartesian commits theses on reason and loses his mother tongue in the process.... He negotiates agreements concrete-bombs-management-war-genocide-power-oil dollars .... He's re-creating the Grozi world: its lumpish bourgeoisie. Its popular-Moussa-speaking-proletariat. Its weathervane-intellectuals-East-West-longwinded-Experts. Its politics-politician-puppets. Something secure-concrete even if he has to pass for a traitor to "the people of reason" a phony white man and that upsets him ...

(10)

Neither Babou nor Grozi has the intellectual power to surpass the dominant frames that prescribe their forms of existence, yet, out of dissatisfaction, they embark on an intellectual journey as they each seek to achieve some form of transformation.

As the two are revealed to hold discussions on the numerous problems they witness and experience across various social registers, valid points and insightful remarks are often made concerning critical questions such as the essence of African knowledge and modes of thinking, the problems experienced in the social and political spheres, the reception of European modern forms of knowledge, etc. They also discuss the need for a new language that may bring out real, fundamental, and "miraculous" transformation, which the misovire narrator is pleased with. Yet, as is the case with the other issues exposed and processed in the work through the lens of Grozi and Babou, nothing can be achieved without a transformative "misovire" subjectivity that oversees its implementation.

Echoing the opening hypothesis that the word may no longer have any meaning, the linguistic condition of Lunaï is further elaborated as being completely functional and formalistic, without any substance and relevance to people's lives. On the one hand, there is a plethora of words employed in meaningless situations: "In Lunaï the same words are always spoken and to anyone at all always the same words at any time no matter when." (26) On the other hand, when people indeed seeks to make meaningful use of words, the image associated with the word is always often pre-determined by forces other than the person's genuine need to be together with the person he or she speaks to: "In Lunaï they look away when they greet you. When they do look at you they're thinking of something else. When they do think of you it's with other pictures in their head" (72). This force is also intimately related to the infiltration of imperial domination and administration that capitalizes on social divisions and the regulation of interpersonal perceptions and connections. Hence, the new language needs to be a language that "speak to all senses at the same time objective and subjective senses would certainly be of great usefulness for communication and communion in Lunaï ...", which is conditioned upon people's autonomous awareness and recognition of his or her unity with the other with whom he or she needs to

communicate to before the force that breaks them apart: “For true individuality exists only because people can communicate from time to time can be aware of their Unity before they subdivide particularize themselves” (72-73). In other words, a new language that serves the benefit of the people in Lunai may only be found when the people themselves surpass the linguistic and conceptual domination that takes place in their daily lives, and make an active effort to live and to connect with others in a way that changes the existing order of things.

It is also in this respect that the merit of the author-misovire-narrator’s stylistic intervention is to be interpreted, for her primary objection of characters like Grozi and Babou rests upon their incapacity to change things, even at the most trivial level: “My problem is that Grozi and Babou talk too much . . . . If they’d act according to what they say I wouldn’t have any qualms about dedicating my golden logbook to them and I’d be in much better shape . . . .” (38). The perspective of a “misovire” remains necessary in the presence of people like Grozi and Babou because if no matching efforts in action can be made, their intellectual elaboration would predictably turn into a means through which they may “assume paternity for a new word” (10). Having thoroughly examined these problems, merged with the narrator’s subjective rumination, the writer, taking up the perspective of the narrating “misovire”, calls for the birth of a new race “of jasper and coral” by way of her linguistically and stylistically crafted intellectual intervention.

In the same year when the “chant-roman” was published, Werewere Liking opened the Dojo Ki-Yi, which eventually became the Village Ki-Yi M’bock, a space that brings together intellectually independent young performance artists to study, create and do research, with her taekwondo black belt. “Ki-Yi”, a term in her native language, Bassa, means “ultimate knowledge”, whereas “M’bock” has a connotation similar to “the universe, the cosmos”. Similar to the open-ended, evolving, and not-easily-definable “chant-roman”, which dynamically brings together the writer’s complex view and thinking over matters such as knowledge production, language, and education in a style that can also be directly traced back to native African origin yet at the same time accessible and thought-provoking for readers who have access to the French language, the project also bears the writer’s commitment to translate her ideas into practice, and to effect changes and to do things differently, or rather, to give birth to her own “new race”. As is revealed in one of her interviews with Amelia Parenteau, the reason for her to start the project is related to both her wish to establish and sustain herself as a professional artist and to better protect her intellectual freedom, and her desire to make changes to the institutionalized educational system in place, which alienates young people from the native African tradition. Hence, the first potential recruits Liking had in mind were “university students not pressured by grades or exams”, or “young people looking for something else. Later, sensing the limit that comes from its direct institutional interference, the initiative took a more radical step to becoming more independent and self-sufficient, so as not to be “totally stiff” and “completely regimented”. The project’s activist profile is further strengthened as Liking struggles to provide free education to her students and to accumulate funding without compromising her intellectual pursuit, as much as she could.

As is observed in Cheryl Toman’s “Werewere Liking’s Village Ki-Yi: Dissidence and Creativity in Abidjan”, more words and phrases from indigenous African languages are used in the theatrical artistic productions than in her literary compositions primarily hosted in French, which also has to be interpreted with due consideration of the weight of the African-language-based perspectives in it. This fact shows Werewere Liking’s commitment to the development of literary and artistic productions in African languages, yet her more radically activist and creative art project of the Ki-Yi Village shows that the preservation of African language and literary development cannot be separated from grassroots projects that also provides an antidote to existing social problems within a community as well as the promotion of the well-being, the intellectual independence and freedom of the artists.

**3) The Swahili Language and the Ambivalent Assertion of a Modern African Subjectivity:** Penina Mlama, also known as Penina Muhando, born in Tanganyika in 1948, is a Tanzanian playwright who writes mostly in Swahili in post-independent Tanzania. The fact that writers in Swahili are less known outside of Tanzania and Kenya, if not forgotten in many conferences and forums on African literature even in Africa, despite the tight ties between the promotion of Swahili in Tanzania and the introduction of a radical political scheme that aims at ensuring socio-political independence of the nation rooted in Africa, is telling of the gap between the implementation of political ideals and the evolution of literary compositions and distributions in Africa<sup>10</sup>. In a 1986 interview with Adeola James, the Guyana-based literary scholar, Mlama indicates her commitment to her most immediate audience in Tanzania and evaluates the problem of the reception of her work beyond national boundaries in light of the disjuncture between the global distribution of African literature and the African reality and the needs and wishes of African writers, as well as the lack of infrastructure to ensure effective communication and exchange of materials across Africa, due to the interests of the power structure involved. As she puts, rather bluntly, “those who have the power to distribute continue to use their own criteria for promoting the people they want for their own purposes” (James 76).

<sup>10</sup> For more perspective on the promotion of Swahili as a national language in Kenya and Tanzania, see Lyndon Harries’s “The Nationalization of Swahili in Kenya”, in *Language in Society*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1976) and Jan Blommaert’s *State Ideology and Language in Tanzania* (2014).

Notwithstanding the different linguistic and socio-political situation, as well as the difference in genre and forms of presentation, Mlama's works often pose similar questions over the right path towards the preservation of African languages, tradition, and subjectivity, at the same time reflexive of the agencies of intellectuals and the meaning of the act of writing. *Lina Ubani* (1984) is one of the plays that emblemizes the intricate and intimate relationships between the Swahili language, as a national language closely related to the ujamaa ideology in Tanzania, and the Tanzanian people. Set at a time after the Uganda-Tanzania War (1978-1979) and at a critical moment when the Tanzanian society is increasingly under the pressure of neo-colonial encroachment, the play exposes effectively the domestic, international as well as intergenerational tensions, and questions the political direction the country takes as well as the roles of the intellectuals, by bringing the audiences' attention to the experiences and perspectives of the four members of Huila's family: Huila, his mom, his wife Sara, and his child Mota. Huila's brother, Daudi, was recruited by the army and passed away in the Uganda-Tanzania War, which leads to the temporary "loss" of Huila's mother's sanity due to excessive grief. Huila, a scholar, finds himself short of means to influence Zoeni, a politician and leader of a delegation in an international conference in Nairobi on the problem of energy, when the latter leans toward signing a deal that trades off the nation's sovereignty. Huila's wife, Sara, struggles to feed and sustain the family. And Mota, from his part, grapples with an effective means to synthesize the different, often contradictory, information and forms of knowing that he acquires from his grandmother, his parents, and at school.

The multilingual aspect of the play is apparent from the very beginning, when Bibi is introduced singing and mourning over the loss of his son Daudi in her tribal language, put together with side-by-side translation in Swahili out of consideration of the audience and the readers. In the second act, which depicts the communications and presentations in the international conference, in addition to serving as the language of communication between the Huila and Zoeni, Swahili is also juxtaposed with languages such as English, French, and German as the other delegates present their thoughts, which simulates the formality of the international conference as the presentations are simultaneously translated into Swahili, another recognized national language of wider political relevance. In this manner, the multifaceted function of Swahili in relation to the different people, within and beyond the play, under different settings, and the complex set of interpersonal relationships that it mediates, are exposed. Swahili serves both as a shared language between the author and her intended audience, and as a symbol of the national language of post-independent Tanzania, with nuanced implications over domestic and international politics. It should also be noted that both Huila and Zoeni are revealed to know English, and Zoeni is often portrayed communicating directly in English with foreigners in the play, which betrays his level of political engagement in a playful manner.

Similarly, the other overtly multilingual character, Bibi, is also a character with a different subjective perception and interpretation of ujamaa. Her attitude best captured in an interesting conversation she had with Mota:

BIBI: Hivi huko shuleni mwalimu anawafundisha juu ya Ujamaa?

Mota: Ndiyo. Kwanini?

BIBI: Hebu niambie basi. Zamani sana ulikuwepo utumwa - nasikia walikuwa wanapita

kijijini kwetu wanapelekwa pwani. Utumwa ukaisha. Ukaja ukoloni, wazungu wakaja kukaa pale kwetu. Halafu ukoloni ukaisha wazungu wakahama. Halafu ukaja uhuru, wakaondoa machifu. Babu wa baba yako, huyo Daudi akaambiwa yeye siyo chifu tena. Uhuru ukaisha. Halafu ndiyo tukasikia Ujamaa, Ujamaa. Huu Ujamaa mwalimu anasema utakwisha lini?

MOTA (anacheka): Ujamaa hauwezi kwisha bibi.

BIBI: Yaani siku zote tutaendelea na hizi vurugu zake? Kijijini ujamaa, nikadhania huku mjini afadhali, kumbe wapi. Ujamaa ujamaa! Baba yako na mama yako kila saa ..... tena mie sitaki kunifungulia redio linanipigia makelele.

(27)

BIBI: Overthere at school the teacher teaches you about Ujamaa?

MOTA: Yes. Why?

BIBI: Tell me then. A long time ago there was slavery - I hear that they were passing by our village as they were being taken to the coast. Slavery then ended. Then colonialism came, the Europeans came and stayed at our place. Then colonialism ended and the Europeans moved. Then freedom came, and they removed the chiefs. Your father's grandfather, that Daudi, was told that he was no longer a chief. Then freedom ended. Then of course we hear about Ujamaa, Ujamaa. This Ujamaa your teacher says when it will end?

MOTA (laughing): Ujamaa can never end grandma.

BIBI: Which means all the time we will continue with these mess of it? In the village (there is) ujamaa, I then thought over there in the city it's better, but where. Ujamaa, ujamaa! Your father and your mother all the time ..... again I don't want to turn on the radio it is screaming at me.

Despite the abundance of occasions for Bibi to be immersed with talks about "ujamaa", it is not effectively communicated to her in a way that allows her to make peace with her subjective perception of reality. The set of abstract nouns like "slavery", "colonialism", "freedom", and "ujamaa" (or "socialism"), when reflected on the experience of Bibi, are all empty signifiers irrelevant to her immediate living concerns. This inadequate form of political guidance that Bibi has access to, combined with the loss of her son in the war, and the financial crisis that the family experiences as a result of the dire economic consequences of the war, inflates Bibi's aversion to and impatience with ujamaa.

The incompatibility between modern socialist forms of thinking and traditional forms of knowing is also reflected in the communication difficulties between Bibi, and Huila and Sara, who are more adamant believers of ujamaa through their schooling, despite their struggles to cope with life in a malfunctioning society. Not being able to comprehend the inner world and the life struggles of each other, Bibi holds a negative view of Sara as she is unable to properly assist her with basic needs due to the general economic crisis:

BIBI: Naenda kuoga, sabuni ya kuogea kaficha. ...

MOTA: Sabuni za kuogea hazipatikani bibi.

BIBI: Mama yako mchawi.

MOTA: Aa bibi! Mbona baba nasema hakuna uchawi.

BIBI: Anakudanganya! ...

(28)

BIBI: I go to bathe, she hides the soap. ...

MOTA: Soaps for bathing cannot be found (these days) grandma.

BIBI: Your mom is a witch.

MOTA: Aa grandma! How come dad says that there is no witchcraft.

BIBI: He is fooling you! ...

And Bibi also blames her son's incapacity to make things better on his ujamaa education:

BIBI: Unasoma ujamaa? Acha mjukuu wangu, akili yako itaharibika. Mwanagalie baba yako. Kasoma sana ujamaa sasa anasaidiana na mkewe kuninyima chakula. Tena ananigombeza kama mtoto mdogo.

(32-33)

BIBI: You are reading ujamaa? Stop it my grandson, your brain will be spoiled. Look at your dad. He reads a lot on ujamaa and now he helps his wife to deprive me of food. And he scolds me as if I were a little child.

Huila and Sara's education does not leave them room to reflect on and to digest traditional forms of knowledge and the different subjective perspectives associated with it. In its place, it gives them a sense of superiority that may lead them to make affirmative remarks over Bibi's use of words such as "uchawi" (witchcraft) without consideration of the context. Bibi, on her part, is unable to make sense of the general political and economic situation of the country that is not immediately relevant to her daily lives, and instead demonizes ujamaa also without any effort of serious engagement. In this way, the inadequacy of the political orientation and guidance in the ujamaa era is exposed.

Notwithstanding her questioning of the meaning of "ujamaa" through the revival of the perspective of a character like Bibi and her heavy criticism of the problems encountered in the Tanzanian society at the time, the author does not blame the policy in and by itself as well as its devout followers who genuinely worked for its implementation, such as Huila. She maintains her commitment to provide a mirror upon which social problems can be reflected in the Tanzanian society, and to open up a space for possible productive solutions to these problems, which is perhaps most evidently reflected in her choice of language, as well as the care she takes to portray the relationship of the language and the different human subjects involved. Whether a deliberate choice or not, the title of the work, "Lina Ubani", is deeply rooted in the Swahili linguistic tradition as well as in the socio-political context in which the play is set, for which an equivalent in the English language cannot be easily found<sup>11</sup> The word "ubani" may refer to a type of incense, a type of

<sup>11</sup> Mlama herself translates the title as "There is an antidote for rot", as is introduced in her essay "Emergence: The Indelible Face of Artistic Creativity in the Struggle for Self-Determination in Africa".

fee paid to a teacher or craftsman, or a type of fee paid for condolence. The phrase “lina ubani”, in the play, first comes in Mota’s ngonjera, a type of poetry closely associated with the promotion of ujamaa that he is asked to compose by his teacher, and that he made from a story told by his grandmother: “Hakika kuna uvundo/Tena kuna ubani. . . . .” (“True there is stench/There is also ubani. . . . .” 57). This line is then elaborated by the narrator in the concluding remarks of the play in two different manners: “La uvundo! Lina ubani!” (“No stench! There is ubani!”) and “ubani wa uvundo/mie siujui” (“ubani of stench/ I don’t know of it”). In all these settings, “ubani” may refer to the incense. However, since the play opens with Bibi’s mourning of the loss of her son in the war and closes with her own death as her grandchild refashions her story into a ngonjera, “ubani” may also be understood as the fee given for condolence. The narrator’s ambivalent attitude towards the existence of a solution to the ongoing problem in the society, for which education also plays a crucial part in it, also makes possible an interpretation of the title, either as fee paid to the teachers and the craftsman, or as fee for condolence. The multilayered reading that the Swahili title promises seal the writer’s continued commitment to Swahili writing and to a Tanzanian reality.

More than three decades later, in an essay, in English, titled “Emergence: The Indelible Face of Artistic Creativity in the Struggle for Self-Determination in Africa”, Mlama reinterprets the literary intervention of hers as well as many other writers in a new social context increasingly dominated by capitalism, by way of introducing the idea of “emergence” to characterize artistic creativity in Africa. Tying up the notion of “emergence” to art’s efficacy “as an expression of the quest for self-determination”, Mlama considers the idea essential to African literary compositions, given the continent’s experience of different forms of oppression and exploitation, and different forms of injustices. Having examined cases studies from across different national and linguistic contexts and historical periods, and having traced comparable efforts from people of African descent in the diaspora, Mlama questions the meaning of artistic creativity in Africa under capitalism, the “socioeconomic development path” for most countries in Africa except for the those who briefly experienced a moment of socialism that continues to put a great number of people from the continent in extreme poverty. By making the crucial distinction between artistic creativity and thinking that capitalism promotes for the continuation of its own survival, and the type of artistic creativity that is needed in Africa that can “confront” or “resolve” the many problems the majority of people from the continent face in their daily lives, Mlama reveals her worries over the lack of activist agency that can project political intervention in artistic creations from Africa at the present capitalist moment, and calls for critical awareness of the problem.

Setting aside the debate about the meaning and the problem of capitalism, and its forms of manifestations across the African continent and its ambivalent relationships with literary composition in different places, Mlama’s perspective on literature conveys her acute awareness of the agency and the responsibility of a writer in the society, as well as her concerns over a complex set of questions related to the well-being of the people who are oppressed and exploited, and their ties with the fundamental question of the subjectivity in African writing.

**4) Ngoma Yethu and the Nature of Linguistic Contestation in African Writing:** One of Paulina Chiziane, the renowned Mozambican woman writer’s recent works, co-authored with Mariana Martins, a traditional healer, titled *Ngoma Yethu: O Curandeiro e o Novo Testamento* (“Ngoma Yethu: The Healer and the New Testament” 2015), reveals the authors’ contemplation of a comparable set of problems concerning the linguistic invention needed in African literature and knowledge production. Despite Chiziane’s self-identification as a storyteller rather than a novelist, most of her earlier writings are fictional in a relatively more novelistic manner. While still existing in the form of story-telling, *Ngoma Yethu* takes up a more essayistic format, which organically combines elements of storytelling and logical reasoning, to introduce views and perspectives from traditional healers and expose the social problems of modern knowledge production in the religious sphere. This stylistic intervention corresponds to the authors’ endeavor to formally recognize and legitimize traditional healing and the forms of understanding and knowing that it carries in the modern postcolonial Mozambican society that, due to the insufficiency of mental decolonization, continues to stigmatize and demonize the practice of traditional healing despite many people’s need for spiritual support from the healers.

According to the authors, the problem traditional healers experience in the present-day society, and its antagonistic relationship with institutionalized modern Christian religious practices, comes as a result of the society’s experience of colonialism, and together with it, a superimposed way of seeing, mediated by the colonial language, that dismembers the vitality of indigenous forms of seeing transmitted through the indigenous languages. As the authors attempt to uncover the still understudied history of the religious prosecutions of activist healers who strived to combat colonial occupation in the last century, it becomes apparent that this “colonial” form of discrimination against traditional healing, rather than being driven by ignorance, serves the interests of a colonial regime. Despite the formal dissolution of a colonial regime, the antagonism between modern knowledge and modern religious practices and the traditional healing persisted as a

result of the lack of thorough effort to fully digest the impact of colonialism and to synthesize modern knowledge with traditional forms of knowing according to a liberated African subjectivity. The work exemplifies an attempt as such.

At the heart of the question of the perception of traditional healing is a question of not fully decolonized understanding and use the Portuguese word, “curandeiro”. As Martins affirms:

A palavra **curandeiro** não diz nada daquilo que nós somos; reduz-nos ao

desprezo e à insignificância. Curandeiro, na língua do colonialismo, significa charlatão, o que vem contradizer a nossa língua e a nossa cultura. Apesar de tudo, o nosso povo conhece o nosso real valor. Por isso, eu acho que:

- Usar palavras desprezíveis, para falar de nós, é um crime propositado.
- Confundir a opinião pública, para que as pessoas não compreendam que o trabalho do curandeiro é uma forma de religião e que ele tem a função de sacerdote, foi outra estratégia de colocá-lo na marginalidade.
- Cada língua dignifica o seu próprio povo.

(108)

The word “curandeiro” does not say anything about who we are; it reduces us to contempt and to insignificance. “Curandeiro”, in the colonial language, signifies charlatan, which contradicts our language and our culture. Despite everything, our people know of our real value. Therefore, I think that:

- Using contemptible words to talk about us is a willful crime.
- Confusing public opinion, so that people do not understand that the healer’s work is a form of religion and that he has the role of a priest, was another strategy to marginalize him.
- Every language dignifies its own people.

In other words, the problematic public image of the traditional healers comes as a result of inadequate translation of their work, originally expressed in indigenous African languages, into the colonial language. A deliberate attempt to study and to reflect on the practice of traditional healers and the practice of a Christian priest may reveal more similarities than qualitative difference, as well as a more disarmed translation between local languages and the colonial language:

Analisemos as sequelas do colonialismo nas mentes alienadas dos africanos: até hoje, não tinham percebido que os Dez Mandamentos da Lei de Deus são as Lei do Espírito. Nunca perceberam a relação entre as palavras *milawu a psikembu*, as Leis dos Espíritos, e *milawu ya Xikwembu*, Lei do Espírito Maior que é Deus. Não conseguiram ver que todos os espíritos são regidos pelas leis definidas pelo Espírito Maior. É por isso que não entenderam ainda a lição libertadora de Cristo: não veio revogar as leis, veio melhorar. Praticar uma evangelização baseada na revogação do outro, fazendo da religião um instrumento de colonização da era moderna? Os curandeiros resistem vigorosamente. ...

(164)

Let us analyze the consequences of colonialism in the alienated minds of Africans: until today, they had not realized that the Ten Commandments of the Law of God are the Law of the Spirit. They never realized the relationship between the words *milawu to psikembu*, the “Laws of Spirits”, and *milawau ya Xikwembu*, “Laws of the Greater Spirit” who is God. They failed to see that all spirits are governed by the laws defined by the Greater Spirit. That is why they have not yet understood the liberating lesson of Christ: he has not come to repeal the laws, he has come to improve. Practicing an evangelization based on the revocation of the other, making religion an instrument of colonization of the modern era? The healers resist (this) vigorously. ...

There does not appear to be a fundamental incompatibility between Christian doctrines and traditional forms of knowing that inform the healing practices once the the politics of the language problem is brought to light. What is required is an effort to understand the ways of seeing and reasoning of the healers in question in their own languages, and a willingness to compare it with Christian ways of understanding, when the derisory colonial perspective and interpretation is displaced.

On the other hand, the effectiveness of traditional healers in dealing with the people’s spiritual needs is also explained via their linguistic privilege, the power their language have over the people they treat:

As palavras de um curandeiro são muito poderosas na mente do paciente: movem-no tanto para o bem como para o mal. Por isso, ele deve controlar a língua.

A língua do curandeiro é, para mim, o centro do combate. É para aqui que devem convergir todos os esforços para a mudança, tanto dos curandeiros como dos seus pacientes e de todos aqueles que querem ver a sociedade moçambicana livre de superstições e com curandeiros de uma mentalidade nova.

(209)

The words of a healer are very powerful in the mind of the patient: they move him so much both for good and for bad. For this reason, he has to control the language.

The language of the healer is, for me, the center of the combat. It is here that all efforts for change must converge, both for healers and for their patients and for all those who want to see the Mozambican society free of superstitions and with healers with a new mentality.

The language of the healers, deeply rooted in African societies, maintains a form of vitality that can impress the patients in an intimate manner not shared with a modern colonial language. In a way, it displays qualities comparable to the language that the misovire narrator in *It shall be of jasper and coral* calls for for the birth of a new liberated race. Similarly, the combat that is projected over the language of the healer is also derived from an urgent need to transcend the limitations of a colonial mentality grounded in the establishment of an African subjectivity over ongoing issues of the society. Accordingly, the authors call for the formal acknowledgment of the problem, and the acceptance of traditional healers in modern schools so that they may familiarize themselves with modern forms of knowing and reasoning, and may strive for a synthesis between the traditional and the modern on their own in a way that no longer presumes the antagonism between the traditional and the modern. This may not only help them ameliorate their healing practices, with a more solid grasp of the merits of the modern knowledge, but also put them in a better position to explain what they do and to contemplate further on the language question as they attempt at a more informed and disarmed translation of the ways of thinking fundamental to their practices from the indigenous language into the colonial/modern language.

Similar to the case of *Lina Ubani*, *Ngoma Yethu* is also a title that cannot be easily rendered into a European language due to its roots in local African traditions. The fact that it denotes a form of practice that continues to be marginalized due to people's insufficient recognition of, and reflection on, the colonial heritage of modern thinking via a modern colonial language, also demands that an equivalent not be easily found until the moment when the unequal relationship between the two languages, and together with them, two ways of knowing, can be properly balanced. In this way, the Africanity of the work, and its foundation in an indigenous language together with the perspective embedded in it, is firmly established, despite being a text written primarily in Portuguese.

A revolutionary who actively participated in the national liberation movement and who turned to literary composition after having alienated herself from the political circle due to her discontent over the political environment after the independence, Chiziane's activist stance in her writing, and the level of radicality, is perhaps best represented in her self-affirmation as a story-teller as well as in her fearless portrayal of serious problems in the society in bold and unexpected manners. As is with the case of her many other books, like *Niketche*, another book whose title is taken from an African language and tradition that is thematically relevant to the contemporary problems presented in the book, the solution she provides for the conflicts she presents in her work often goes back to the recognition and the interpretation of a traditional African concept of culture and its relevance to the well-being of the people in question. Curiously, while *Niketche*'s root in the Macua tradition is rendered explicit given the book's subtheme on the social inequalities between the Southern and the Northern parts of Mozambique, *Ngoma Yethu*'s specific tribal root is not identified, either due to its common comprehensibility across many African languages or because of the systematic problem of the modern stigmatization of the traditional culture across the country, if not the continent as a whole, that the author seeks to expose and question. The insertion of the subjectivity of a traditional healer and the introduction of her commentaries on the Bible also give rise to controversies given the challenges it poses on religious practices in the country, if not at least among the already privileged class of people. In an interview conducted with Nafeesah Allen, Paulina Chiziane likewise situates her literary position by way of referring to an activist writing tradition in the country preceded by figures like Noémia de Sousa, a mixed-raced Mozambican woman poet who went into exile due to her writing, and shares her uneasiness with the problematic contemporary book culture. In an environment of ineffective book distribution, shortage of bookstores, and the lack of access general population enjoys to a wider range of books from across the continent and the diaspora, as well as other from continents other than Europe due to the absence of systematic acquisition and translation of books in a system not oriented towards the interests of the Mozambican people due to the foreign ownership of the book stores, Chiziane's insistence in maintaining her subjectivity and in speaking the truth itself becomes a dangerous act. However, to what extent does an influential writer who tries her best to make her writings



accessible to common people, but who nevertheless is historically confined to writing in Portuguese and to a distribution network that does not agree with her intellectual pursuit and authorly intentions, can get her point across if it is not going to lead to substantial efforts in social reform, both within the nation and beyond? While it is one thing to credit the author's efforts in and by itself, a reader is perhaps also obliged to reflect on his or her own place and agency, and to take comparable actions in the generation of a supportive environment towards decolonization.

#### **4. Conclusions: Pan-Africanism, Intellectual Activism, and the Linguistic Redistribution of Spheres of Knowledge**

In a 2017 essay titled "African Languages - Lifting the mask of invisibility", Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o revisits the question of African language and its relationship with cultural imperialism and the decolonization of knowledge production as pertinent to more recent global developments. Opening the essay with a 1962 speech by Kwame Nkrumah on the importance of African languages to the production of a newly liberated African nation, Ngũgĩ renders clear the stark contrast between the reality as projected by the utopian, revolutionary, pan-African thinkers and the reality as experienced at the present moment, and affirms the relevance of revolutionary ideas from activist African intellectuals in the middle of the twentieth century. Similar to the works of the other works analyzed in this paper, Ngũgĩ, in this essay, maintains the view that the development of literature, scholarships, and knowledge expressed in African languages does not only constitute an ethical approach to the critical issue of documentation and preservation of the African languages in danger, but also carries the unfulfilled hope towards the achievement of decolonization at both the intellectual and the material level. Respect for one's mother tongue against social pressures and expectations, in this case, makes for the first step towards development as such. It is also in light of this context that contemporary activist effort initiated by African writers from the continent, to facilitate the production and publication of African literature rooted in Africa, and in African languages should be interpreted and evaluated.

Jalada Africa, which self-identifies as a pan-African writers' collective, run by volunteers, has its aim the creation and the maintenance of a cooperative and collective platform that encourages efficient development and publication of literary projects from African writers and thinkers. Actively maintaining a website with a highly accessible interface, as well as other social media accounts such as Facebook and Twitter, the project makes for a vibrant example of contemporary efforts led by young African writers to provide alternative paths for the promotion of the development of African literature and African languages in response to the deficiencies in the society. Nevertheless, the fact of the project being coordinated and promoted through online platforms and the fact of English being its lingua franca inevitably poses the critical question of inclusion as well as the project's self-positioning within a global culture that continues to operate in an exploitative manner and dictates social divisions based on grounds not based on the needs of the people in question, begs the continued reflections and actions from activist intellectuals concerning the direction of the project and its projected outcome. From a linguistic standpoint, CHAUKIDU, or Chama cha Ukuzaji wa Kiswahili Duniani ("The Party of the Growth of Swahili in the World"), which has its mission the promotion of the growth and the prominence of the Swahili language, is another influential activist collective, run by lovers of Swahili in the world, that attempts to build bridges among existing organizations for the development and the use of the language, as well as to bring together a transnational community of Swahili speakers and lovers for a fair and healthy exchange of ideas that may avoid the pitfalls that come as a result of social and political confinements. Yet, the fact that the organization is committed to one single language that has different implications to different African communities also, limited its scope and its impact on the preservation and the generation of respect of other African languages and cultural traditions, in addition to the restrictions posed by the platforms and the mediums of communication, which also demands efforts, both intellectual and practical from the activists. On the other hand, with many people in Africa obliged to familiarize themselves with more than one language for survival purposes, accessibility to and proficiency of one single African indigenous language, in many cases, also become a privilege that not all people enjoy. How to put activist projects towards the conservation and promotion of African languages to work without disrespecting the social reasons behind diverse forms of linguistic realities becomes another critical problem to consider.

At a different level, in a world still primarily driven by the force of capital, which plays a significant part in the shaping of not only the linguistic and national/regional boundaries, but also the disciplinary and methodological divisions in educational systems, as well as the mediums of communication and express, to what extent an activist endeavor at epistemic reform is sufficient for the realization of effective social transformation that ensures the peaceful and equal co-existence of all language users involved as well as their right to use their languages in a non-imposing manner, remains to be contemplated. As with Simon Gikandi's reservation, in "The Fragility of Languages", with the "unspoken rift between language and literature" that is unable to reverse the social force that continues to alienate the documentation

of endangered languages from the promotion of the well-being of the language users, hopes may only still be envisioned through matching efforts from scholars in the Global North that transcends the disciplinary boundaries and that reestablishes the integrity of human subjectivity in knowledge production that is also responsible towards the human subjects in question. In this situation, more things can be learned as one examines and reflects on the essential factors that bring together African people as a collective, and ways to effectively categorize and distribute written forms of knowledge in a way that does not encroach on this subjectivity and its communal implications, for which literary references abound.

Take the example of José Luandino Vieira's *A Vida Verdadeira de Domingos Xavier* ("The True Life of Domingos Xavier"), which brings the readers to the life of Domingos Xavier, a black Angolan tractor driver who is arrested, violated and tortured until his death to protect the identity of a white revolutionary whom he considered a friend, as well as to the perspectives and experiences of Domingos Xavier's family and friends as they strive to cope with the Domingos Xavier's incident, with anti-colonial struggles at the backdrop. While the work is often discussed along the lines of the formation of the Angolan nation, the brutality of the colonial regime and the violence waged against the local communities, the courageous anti-colonial resistance from the black community, and the solidarity among revolutionaries and the local communities, close attention paid to how Vieira weaves together the linguistic aspect as well as the non-linguistic aspects of the work with the description of the perspectives and experiences of the characters involved also reveals Vieira's reservation with his own linguistic capacity to affirm and represent a historical reality and the interpersonal relationships involved in it. Aside from his introduction of Kimbundu vocabulary and his syntactic interventions to represent the linguistic habits of the main characters' most immediate community, the climax of the story - the formal recognition and acceptance of the importance of Domingos Xavier's heroic deeds in the formation of a collective Angolan people among a wider population is introduced in a music club, where people of diverse background, status, and problems in life would frequent and gather for their own needs. Elaboration in this manner clearly shows that the possibility of a collective unity can only be achieved when a verbalized reality of one's deeds can reach the heart of people of diverse linguistic backgrounds and situations in a disarmed manner, also resonating with their own struggles in life. Himself a revolutionary of Portuguese descent who was imprisoned for eleven years for his work against the colonial regime and for the independence of Angola, Vieira's secures the merit of the activist work of people like him through his consideration of the means to establish its relevance to the people he is committed to as well as through his attention paid to the linguistic situation of these people and their ways of being, seeing and understanding. The epigraph of the book, which comes from Agostinho Neto's poem "Mussunda Amigo", in which the author contemplates the nature of the bond between him and his friend Mussunda, who ostensibly sacrificed himself to protect him and his revolutionary acts in a way similar to Domingos Xavier, and reveals his anguish over the fact that he has to write in a language that his friend does not share:

A vida, a ti a devo  
à mesma dedicação, ao mesmo amor  
com que me salvaste do abraço  
da jibóia

à tua força  
que transforma os destinos dos homens.

A ti  
amigo Mussunda, a ti devo a vida.

E escrevo  
versos que tu não entendes!  
Compreendes a minha angústia?

Para aqui estou eu  
Mussunda amigo  
escrevendo versos que tu não entendes

Não era isto  
o que nós queríamos, bem sei

mas no espírito e na inteligência  
nós somos.

Nós somos  
Mussunda amigo  
Nós somos!

Inseparáveis  
caminhando ainda para o nosso sonho.

The life, I owe it to you  
to the same dedication, to the same love  
with which you saved me from the embrace  
of a boa

to your strength  
that transforms the fates of men

To you  
friend Mussunda, to you I owe the life

And I write  
verses that you do not know!  
Do you understand my anguish?

It was not this  
that we wanted, I know  
but in the spirit and in the intelligence  
we are.

We are  
Friend Mussunda  
We are!

Inseparable  
still marching into our dream.

From the analysis above, it can be seen that despite being often written and transmitted in different languages, many of which cannot be dissociated with Africa's past and present experience of colonialism, a significant amount of important African literary works, if not already substantially multilingual in and by itself, demonstrates the writers' keen awareness and persistent questioning of the relationship between the language of composition, different levels of politics of the time, as well as the lives and the experiences of the different groups of African people that the writers are concerned with. The impossibility to overlook the differently manifested impact of colonialism on modern African literature and on the configuration of legitimate forms of African knowledge, especially concerning the language question and its role in the affirmation of a subjectivity rooted in Africa, also illustrates the extent to which writings from Africa may provide insightful perspectives into the present state and the pitfalls of institutionalized knowledge production, communitywide, nationwide, continent-wise, and worldwide at the moment.

As scholars and students of African literature based in an institution in the Global North, who enjoy relative privilege over the materials at one's disposal as well as relative freedom to craft one's original research as one continues to grow as a scholar and thinker, and to think about how to prepare for a meaningful career both within and beyond the academia, perhaps we have more to reflect on concerning our own positions in the world and relationship to the people whose literature we study, as well as the implications of our linguistic capacities and the significance of our scholarship. It is also important to cultivate a sensitivity to problems in one's own immediate society and beyond at a higher level, as well as a habit to think comparatively and creatively toward an ethical means to review and redistribute our own spheres of

knowledge that do not alienate ourselves from a responsible perspective from Africa in relation to other people from both Africa and beyond. Perhaps in addition to discussing thematically and linguistic oriented problems, one should also cultivate a habit of thinking in terms of how to translate the activist spirit in many African literary and cultural productions and how to write and interpret accordingly in a meaningful way that can cultivate a more equitable and sustainable form of communal existence. While decolonization appears to still be an ongoing worldwide process, maybe we also have more to learn and to think in terms of what went wrong with past revolutionary efforts, the type of change that present situations demand, the projected outcome of a real liberated culture, and a peaceful path towards it without waging more unnecessary violence and oppression.

### Conflicts of Interest

There is no conflicts of interest related to this article.

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