

# Nchetaka

*Let the Kite Hawk have its Perch:*

A Recovering African Psychologist's  
Narratives of Resistance and the Quest  
for our own Story

A PRESENTATION AT THE 'DECOLONIZING OUR UNIVERSITIES' CONFERENCE

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## Introduction

*Like a red-faced itch, which we have scratched, and which has stubbornly refused to go away*, we are now witnessing a growing consciousness around the world – a ‘global’ reassessment of our previously cherished social givens and a reconfiguration of identities inherited from our colonial past and present. Once, Eurocentrism, so pervasive and unnoticed as to be taken as ‘common sense’ (Shohat & Stam, 1997), flourished in its invisibility and anonymity, exercising a range of influences that comfortably transcended the geographical boundaries of its heartland, shaping a world system in its image, silencing arguments to the contrary, and expelling non-western indigenous existences to the peripheries of importance. Today, the most damaging responses levelled against the totalizing paradigm of Western Enlightenment (or the Western ‘sociology of ideas’, Mlambo, 2006) and its corollaries have served to expose the situatedness of its thrust and its pretensions to subsuming universality.

In a sense, the sub-conscious notion that the West is the centre of human experience, the epitome of knowledge and the pinnacle of all possible cultural aspirations, from which other cultures are unfortunate deviations in need of saving and by which all value must be judged, has now been brought in all its writhing ugliness to conscious light. The literature base is replete with critiques of, and countercurrents resisting, Eurocentricism hidden in the social sciences. To the detriment of African social systems and locally valued memories and narratives of forged togetherness, Eurocentric thought continues to serve imperialist purposes and perpetuate inhibitions on our imaginations and subjectivities. The once isolated voices of dissent, now gradually climbing into the chorused crescendo of a paradigm shift, are emanating from African universities and their counterparts in the so-termed Global South – thus problematizing the normativity of our lived experiences and strengthening the call for a balance of sort.

The remarks of an Igbo character in (arguably) Africa’s most prestigious novel, *Things fall apart*, will set the tone for my gift of thoughts and words – which I am most pleased to offer, in return for the privilege to speak afforded me by the organizers of this conference. In the third chapter of Chinua Achebe’s most popular work of art, the tragic hero, Okonkwo, who will later on straddle the receding lines between a way of life he has always known and a cultural invasion of white-skinned men, visits a respected elder who is rich in yams and mirth. In the guileless manner by which the celebrated author contrives the English language, and communicates the rich texture of Igbo life, Achebe writes:

There was a wealthy man in Okonkwo's village who had three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children. His name was Nwakibie and he had taken the highest but one title which a man could take in the clan. It was for this man that Okonkwo worked to earn his first seed yams. He took a pot of palm-wine and a cock to Nwakibie. Two

elderly neighbours were sent for, and Nwakibie's two grown-up sons were also present in his obi. He presented a kola nut and an alligator pepper, which were passed round for all to see and then returned to him. He broke the nut saying: We shall all live. We pray for life, children, a good harvest and happiness. You will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me. Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break."

The proverb about the kite and the eagle is perhaps the most popular in Igbo-land. Though I have been informed that it is no longer said in the same way Achebe used it, the message and sentiments it expresses, I think, are largely unchanged: a recognition that there are more than one side to a story, an awareness of cultural relativism and a call for balance to support our differences. The proverb of the kite and the eagle (and their respective perches) is the stern finger rebuking Eurocentric's intolerance of the Other; its operational suitability lies in its innate ability to redeem and problematize the 'heresy of *difference*' and the 'taboo of a response', which, I reckon, summarily comprise the 'evil' Western ideals try to expel from the world.

It is from this ingenuous wisdom of the Igbos that I draw a calabash of richness to drink as I attempt to articulate a vision in the context of the present day critiques of the social sciences in African universities. In this presentation, I will proceed by offering an overview about the counter-discourses resisting Eurocentric influence within various academic disciplines in African universities. I will sometimes allude to similar discourses beyond the continent when I believe that they help clarify or complement the Afrocentric perspective. Additionally, in a haste to move decisively through the already saturated field of theoretical appraisals and literature on the issue of Eurocentrism, I shall restrict myself to some of the critiques emanating from the social sciences alone – hoping merely to 'connect the dots' in such way as to grant some perspective on the state of the critique of Eurocentrism in African universities. This overview will be closely followed by a focus on the Western discipline of psychology and its notional inaptness for the African context. While highlighting noble attempts at reconfiguring the discipline to address lived experiences, social needs and cultural sensitivities on the continent, I question if these are adequate – especially when macro-concerns and colonial infrastructures and institutional thresholds limiting transformation are taken into consideration. I forward what I have often taken to be a controversial series of inquiries, but which, in light of our attempts at decolonization, I cannot help but perceive as 'necessary' questions to ask: 'Is it time for psychology as a discipline to die? What do we continue to forego when we uncritically perpetuate the assumptions about human be-ing and the approaches to its study embedded beneath the discipline? How has the discipline aided, supported and advanced locally held values, narratives and beliefs about men, women and their offspring? What would an 'adequate' reconfiguration of the discipline look like – and what would be appropriate for the geo-cultural space we conveniently call Africa?' If, as Seidman (1994; in Shizha, 2006) states that

At the heart of the modern West is the culture of the Enlightenment. Assumptions regarding the unity of humanity, the individual as the creative force of society and history, the superiority of the west, the idea of science as Truth, and the belief in social progress, have been fundamental to Europe and the United States.

I bring this trajectory of thoughts to a self-reflexive plateau on the steep climb up for closure on this matter as I delve into my own experiences of resistance against the hegemonic influences of Eurocentrism. Through this passage of narrative vulnerabilities and (I am wont to admit) slight self-indulgences, I hope to bring you to a resting place (as opposed to a zenith – for I do not *believe* in 'destinations' as much as I do in 'journeys') where I present the outlines of a vision for

the revitalization of the social sciences (most especially psychology) in Africa – not in the sense proposed by many thinkers that leaves the associated disciplines slightly improved along Western dimensions, but in ways that imply a total overhaul towards the ‘development of an African social science tradition’ (Mlambo, 2006), the courage to remember our forgotten stories, and the imagination to co-create change.

This presentation is, in more ways than are obvious, an act of resistance. Instead of conforming to the particularly dull and flightless traditional forms of academic writing (usually associated with the scientific community’s posturing to neutrality, objectivity and legitimacy), I have chosen to communicate in close connections with an Afrocentric worldview – one that does not see the world as a mechanical arena of causals and outcomes as implied by modern physics, but as a field imbued with mysteries, mystical intuition and harmonious interrelatedness that silence our eagerness to explain, predict and control. An Afrocentric approach would suggest an accommodation of more-than-material realms (Myers, 1985) and a tacit substitution of ‘the-world-as-you-make-it’ for ‘the-world-as-it-is’.

Thus, I am choosing to unleash my own struggles for poetic expression, a sense of the paradoxical, intuitions about the contradictions and ambiguity by which I suspect the ‘world’ to be comprised, and a yearning to bridge the assumed disparities between science and art - which all have hitherto been buried beneath institutionally instigated practices within the academia. I hope this approach is by no means seen to be less important to the tasks I have outlined previously; indeed, I believe efforts at decolonizing the academia must touch base with how the academe communicates. Even more crucially, we must find the courage to unlearn the givens of scholarship we, as academics, oftentimes hide behind to legitimize our own opinions. This essay is thus best understood not as a cold dishing of facts and figures or as an elaborate way of evading contradictions, but as a coquettish dance: the very poetic embrace of uncertainty and ambivalence, the very possibility that I will in turn – like the hegemony I strive to deconstruct – reify voices I prefer to hear and silence those that I will rather not listen to, and a realization that the world is too messy to fit into any one model (It must be admitted that I worry a bit that my usual insecurities would surface and I would immediately recourse to the passiveness of academic prose. In a way, therefore, this essay is a struggle, another test for my unlearning exercises, and, hopefully, a clarion call for support from a community of kindred strugglers).

Accordingly, I deem it no less important for mentioning at this point my more than fair share of hesitancy at uncritically demarcating the world into the so-called West and the non-West. I am compelled to adopt the critical approach of Shohat and Stam (1997), who remind us that what is of real concern, what we resist, is:

the universalization of Eurocentric norms, the idea that any race, in Aimé Césaire's words, "holds a monopoly on beauty, intelligence, and strength." Our critique of Eurocentrism is addressed not to Europeans as individuals but rather to dominant Europe's historically oppressive relation to its internal and external "others." We are in no way suggesting, obviously, that non-European people are somehow "better" than Europeans, or that Third World and minoritarian cultures are inherently superior. There is no inborn tendency among Europeans to commit genocide, as some "ice people" theorists would suggest - such theories merely colonialist demonizations - nor are indigenous or Third World peoples innately noble and generous. Nor do we believe in the inverted European narcissism that posits Europe as the source of all social evils in the world. Such an approach remains Eurocentric ("Europe exhibiting

its own unacceptability in front of an anti-ethnocentric mirror," in Derrida's words) and also exempts Third world patriarchal elites from all responsibility.

The focus is more on institutional discourses than on intentions, and less on the 'goodness' or 'badness' than on 'historically configured relations of power' (Shohat & Stam, 1997). It would be impossible to clinically distinguish, at some levels, between cultures at the polar extremes of present easy political categorizations given the syncretistic relationships that have produced cross-currents of mutual influence. Additionally, it would be difficult to advocate a return to a utopian past of African cultural wealth, for, though it may not be apparent, but such a notion also supports the very Eurocentric, positivist idea that cultures are objects in time, displaced only by other interfering objects. Akinyela (2002) comments in the beginning of his article:

Some Afrocentric thinkers have argued for the idea of returning to *classical* African cultures as our source of Afrocentric knowledge. The most often referred to *classical* culture being that of Kemet (ancient Egypt). There is little doubt among most African centred writers that Kemet, and the ideas, spirituality and worldview derived from it, are highly significant to world African culture. Nevertheless, this recognition of Kemet's significance does not support the notion of *classical* cultural paradigms as sources of knowledge. In other writings I have articulated my ideas about the development of Critical African centred critical theory in which I have raised theoretical concerns about attempts to codify the cultural past and to define so-called classical periods of African history. I argue that this practice is an imitation of Eurocentric models that define Ancient Greece as the classical paradigm for western culture. While agreeing wholeheartedly with the basic Afrocentric argument of the need to create a major shift in the hegemonic Eurocentric epistemology, I believe that focusing on the idea of returning to so-called *classical* African cultures runs the risk of de-historicizing culture and knowledge and reducing the complexities of African culture. There is a danger in understanding culture and knowledge as something static and unchanging rather than as something that is constantly changing and socially constructed.

Believing that cultures are snapshots of a moment in time – at least, our *descriptions* of them – and the rich weave of interactions that have mutually shaped the world's diversity, I am less inclined to subscribe to the ideas that situate the so-called 'West' in the 'evil' half of a global moral dichotomy – though, if only for its convenience, I will admit that it is an easy temptation.

### **Critiques of Eurocentric Thought: Overview of African-based Contributions in Social Sciences**

A renaissance of a sort is beginning to quicken its pace on the African continent; it is the questioning of a silent conviction that we inherited from palpably colonial pasts and today's struggle in resistance of more virulent strains of yesterday's imbalances. This 'renewal' of Afrocentric consciousness or, at least, a growing concern for sensitivity to African indigenous life management systems is, at least in the academia, mostly evinced by the increasing concentration of pan-African publications, the establishment of new universities with conspicuously Afrocentric sympathies, and efforts at influencing policy development and institutional praxis towards the support of indigenous cultures. A good example of a university with an explicitly Afrocentric focus is Covenant University in western Nigeria, which was set up in 2002 for the 'emancipation of the black man' by a charismatic religious leader, Bishop David Oyedepo, who also serves as its

Chancellor. Like most other private universities springing up in the country, Covenant University draws its *raison d'être* from a pervasive consciousness that may be succinctly articulated in one of the Bishop's favourite aphorisms, "White does not equate to 'right'; *black* does not mean *lack*".

However, hovering above the aphoristic declarations of a few are the discourses of concern that have incited these resistances. Scholars such as Mlambo (2006), Naidoo (1996), Toure (2010), Zeleza (2005) articulate the problematic in question as the discourse of the globalizing hegemony of 'modernity' and Africa's relations to it. Mlambo (2006) writes:

The intellectual and cultural ferment that characterised the Renaissance resulted in a profound transformation in the way that European society conceptualised, organised and managed itself and brought about dramatic changes in Europe's economic and political systems and practices. These changes had far-reaching consequences for the rest of the world, in general, and Africa, in particular, as the societies outside Europe were gradually but progressively incorporated into an evolving international trade network with its centre in Europe in the early phase of what we now call globalisation.

This usurpation of spaces and moulding of the world into a Europe-based monoculture edged out Africa into the fringes of relevance – thereby placing the continent's wealth of worldviews and potentials on a predetermined value scale created in an alien land. Abdi (2010) comments:

In the case of Africa especially, the expansive processes of globalization that have become dominant from the mid-19th century to about the mid-20th century, ushered in new and unprecedented forms of globalizations that were driven, *sans exception*, by Europe's political, economic, educational and cultural interests and intentions. It was here where African cultures, epistemologies, worldviews and indigenous learning systems were either destroyed or relegated to the status of non-viability.

Accordingly, Zeleza (2005) asserts that at stake is 'how Africa can transcend the alterity of negative difference embedded in Eurocentric epistemology, and whether autonomy, supremacy, sovereignty, and hegemony are possible for Africa'. William (2009), in his essay on African jurisprudence, elaborates on these felt urgencies of the moment, the political impetuses now innervating the tense 'between' that separates Africa from the homogenizing West:

Conceptually, what can Africa contribute to the world, and the history of ideas? More specifically, what has Africa contributed to the world? Some, like Hugh Trevor-Roper and Andrew Foote, would say, respectively, that it is pure darkness or earth's catalogue of crimes. The irony of this perception about Africa is obvious: Africa's light was tampered with, and deliberately distorted by those who cast it into the immediacy of eternal loss. Incidentally, this perception has become a pervading and phenomenal characterisation of Africa whose historical past bears the primacy of true human civilisation...The project of Africa renaissance is an attempt to correct this distasteful perception about Africa. In precise terms, African philosophy, though a latecomer to the scene of philosophical interrogations of history and ideologies of African people, is engulfed in the burden of a thematic and cultural search for self-definition.

The economic, socio-political and intellectual landscapes on the continent are thus experiencing the seismic turmoil of reconfiguration – and this is, I think, not unrelated in some ways to the energies generated by postmodern thought and its varying critiques of metanarratives, which must include the hitherto 'common-sense' of Eurocentrism. This African renaissance may be viewed as a resistance to the ideas now formally conceptualized in the academic disciplines of Western social sciences. It is important to note that

While the social sciences as academic disciplines are of relatively recent origin, the ideas that later gave rise to them had been around for a long time even if not conceptualised and articulated as academic disciplines. Thus, ideas about economic organisation, politics, law, and social organisation, among others, were influential in shaping European society and practices long before disciplines formally classified as social sciences came into existence. It was, for instance, contemporary European ideas of what constituted sound economic principles and practices, then known as Mercantilism, which guided Europe's early domestic economic arrangements and its overseas policies. The quest for bullion, then regarded as the true measure of a nation's wealth, inspired the voyages of exploration and led, subsequently, to the colonisation of the Caribbean and Latin America and parts of Africa and Asia. Equally, even though Anthropology as a discipline had not yet been established, it was European assumptions about the inferiority of non-western societies and the superiority of Western culture that influenced their attitudes to and interactions with the societies of the lands that they subjugated (Mlambo, 2006, p.162-163).

Thus, the social sciences reified and taught in African centres of learning, and by African scholars, might very well be understood as the last great bastion of Eurocentrism today as Ake (1979) indicates:

Every prognostication indicates that Western social science continues to play a major role in keeping us subordinate and underdeveloped; it continues to inhibit our understanding of the problems of our world, to feed us noxious values and false hopes, to make us pursue policies which undermine our competitive strength and guarantee our permanent underdevelopment and dependence. It is becoming increasingly clear that we cannot overcome our underdevelopment and dependence unless we try to understand the imperialist character of Western social science and to exorcise the attitudes of mind which it inculcates.

It is to this vast field of ideas, assumptions and perspectives that I now turn my attention. It must be emphasized that if the evolving project for self-definition on the African continent (beleaguered by memories of colonial violence and loss of indigenous quests for freedoms) must gain momentum, then we, Africans recovering from our once worshipped social science inheritances, must perhaps find the courage to commit the 'sin of apostasy' against these disciplines. *Why is this important?* First, speaking with these moralistic tones will probably leave many thinking that the disciplines of sociology, psychology, anthropology, history, and economics (as well as the many other disciplines classified as social sciences) are 'bad' things Africans must revolt against because they were fashioned and framed on foreign worldviews. This cannot be farther from the sense I wish to convey. In the stead of the 'bad'/'good' dichotomy we so easily employ to make value judgments, I wish to insert the paradox of 'faith through unbelief', the gist of which is the idea that oftentimes the best way one might express or practice belief is by denying the very belief. Another way to capture this paradox is by asserting, for instance, that the best way to practice psychology on the African continent is to avoid practising it: psychology's greatest expression and salvation on the continent may lie in its dissolution. It is thus my contention that, given the newly 'found' provinciality of the social sciences (as against its supposed universality), our best responses to the homogenizing influences may lie in tapping into the contradictions and counter-currents that inhabit all these discourses.

A rich literature base of critiques of Eurocentrism in Western social sciences from African scholars is readily available to even the less than enthusiastic enquirer. These critiques capture the increasingly influential perspectives about Africa's place in the so-called 'grand scheme of things'.

They effectively represent efforts at challenging what is seen as the overbearing influence of Western thought. It might be helpful to think of these critiques as part of the Afrocentric project broadly taken. In general, Afrocentricity encapsulates these various responses to Eurocentrism. Tillotson (2011) writes that

In a global context Afrocentricity must be understood as a robust response to exclusion, western hegemony and anti-egalitarian structural, institutional and systemic practices...the Afrocentric project represents a response mechanism that addresses the hegemonic framework inherent in biased, historical, cultural and educational practices.

Elsewhere in Tillotson's article, Mazama (2003; in Tillotson, 2011) asserts that 'the Afrocentric idea rests on the assertion of the primacy of the African experience for African people. Its aim is to give us our African, victorious consciousness back. In the process, it also means viewing the European voice as just one among many, and not necessarily the wisest one'. This decentering of European experiences and assumptions in the various social sciences motivates and characterises the gamut of Afrocentric critiques of Eurocentrism now available in journals, university libraries and conference proceedings across the continent and beyond it.

A good starting point for surveying this most intensive field of counter-currents against Eurocentric influences might be Claude Ake. Described as one of Africa's foremost political philosophers (Arowosegbe, 2008), Claude Ake's contributions towards the re-examining of knowledge production in Africa and the dynamics of colonialism embedded in the perpetuation of the Western social sciences continue to be relevant today – especially to those who feel that the planetary expansion and legitimacy of the social sciences have done little to support the world's perplexing diversity of cultural configurations. Ake's (1979) critiques of the social sciences in general (as irrelevant and passé in the African situation), the normativity of the nation-state as the most self-evidently legitimate form of our political collectivities, the universalizing nature of Western assumptions about time, place, economy, value and behaviour and the 'institutional privileging of theoretical knowledge together with the very ontology of "theory" as a discrete and knowable category of critical engagement' have thematic congruence with other scholastic attempts at decolonizing the social sciences and refuting the applicability of Eurocentric assumptions in praxis within Africa. Such works cut across religious studies (Toure, 2010), childhood studies (Nsamenang, 1999), literature (Mawere, 2011, Ladele, 2009, Shantz, 2009), sociology and history (Ngaruka, 2007) and psychology (Naidoo, 1996).

Efforts in Oyeshile (2008) and Kebede (2004) need mention. Both authors strive to reconstitute Western philosophy within the African context and defend traditional African worldviews and traditional values. More significant however are their objections to the idea that African philosophy is reducible to ethnophilosophy or simply a reaction to Western philosophy. Kebede (2004) does a good job at challenging the easy distinctions of 'rational'/'irrational' habitually employed to characterize Western and African philosophies respectively. The result of this profound recentering and delimitation of African philosophy is a new focus on the merits of African philosophies and the development of more inclusive curricula for African studies (Pellerin, 2009).

## **Reimagining Psychology: The Quest for an African Psychology**

The field of psychology (which is more central to my inquiry), like most other social science disciplines, in deep contradistinction to its initial origins, now seems profoundly mired by the politics, perspectival limitations, cultural situatedness and historical weaknesses it once hoped to extricate itself from. Stripped of its universalist garbs and pretensions to ontological stability (especially by the employment of language describing its 'search' for behavioural 'laws') by the postcolonial thoughts of non-Western and anti-Eurocentric (not anti-Europe) scholarship, psychology now stands open to the highest bidder. Concomitantly, Africans, contained within the prisons enforced by theories emanating from psychology's heartland, psychological tests with blind spots focused on the unique cultural heritages and subjectivities of non-Westerns, and curricula that demand adherence to, or conformity with, standards set outside their continent, have begun for some time now to navigate their ways back into their homelands.

There is a strong sense that psychology is not at all the neutral connector between us (humans, that is) and the-world-of-behaviour-as-it-is; more significantly, the idea that there is a single world of behaviour, a set of laws promulgated beyond our subjectivities and dwelling 'out there' in an objective realm – waiting for any to discover – which describes how humans think, act and behave is increasingly met with strong opposition. Though these counter-arguments have not always carried the 'decolonization' banner, they have been provoked by the more than compelling social realities of African communities long silenced under the stern foothold of institutionalized psychological research (Akomolafe, 2010; Yeh, Hunter, Madan-Bahel, Chiang, & Arora, 2004).

Thus, a number of commendable 'decolonialist' developments (Wright, Webb, Montu, & Wainikesa, 2002; Washington, 2010; Ovuga, Boardman, & Oluka, 1999; Okoro, 2010; Ocholla, 2007; Nwoko, 2009) have made inroads into mainstream praxis in the psychology departments of Nigerian universities, for instance. Worthy of mention are the efforts of Professor Ebigbo of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka at concretizing psychology within the African context. His efforts at standardizing psychosomatic complaints among Nigerians led to the Enugu Somatization Scale, which continues to be used in place of more 'traditional' clinical scales (like MMPI) and recommended widely in the country. Ebigbo (1997) developed the Harmony Restoration Therapy, a psychotherapeutic technique that draws heavily from the spiritual and socio-ecological consciousnesses of the Igbo people. Professor Ebigbo's wide influence has meant that young scholars in the country take on his decolonialist sentiments.

This Afrocentric paradigm finds further support in Obayan (1995), where the author debates and challenges the notional hegemony of the extended family, and questions its appropriateness to African family systems. She develops the alternative notion of the 'extensive' family, arguing that the complexities of the African family are too wide to fit neatly into the constraints of a European nuclear family comprised, at least in a popular sense, of a father, a mother and two children. With similar energies, Azibo (1989) deconstructs the assumed superiority of the DSM nosology for the classification of mental illnesses by developing one in consonance with the African social order. The Azibo Nosology is a triumphant affirmation of African consciousness and psychology.

Who can forget Professor Lambo's celebrated legacy in reconstituting clinical psychology praxis within an Afrocentric framework (Erinosho, 1976)? By creating a mental health village where indigenous people in Nigeria could be cared for, Lambo set the pace for an Afrocentric psychology today. Though efforts at codifying an African-centred psychology are still fraught with the ambiguities and politics that characterizes any quest for redefinition, there are at least

clear signs of conviction that the social science of psychology, as inherited from colonial pasts, cannot continue in the ways with which it was received in the first place.

Unifying these efforts is the quest (implicit or transparent) to make psychology more responsive to the needs and cultural aspirations of African peoples. Naidoo (1996) comments:

The indictment that psychology has suffered from amnesia and has failed to fulfil its professional mandate to the culturally different has become endemic. The status of psychology is being increasingly contested by practitioners of all races (Katz, 1985) who have appealed to the profession to re-examine and re-evaluate the theory and practice base of psychology and its sub-disciplines. Hence, more and more psychologists discontented with mainstream psychology are calling for a theory and practice relevant to their particular sociocultural milieu and for recognition of ethnic pluralism and differences in world views in multicultural societies.

### **Just around the river bend: Reasserting our space**

It is impossible at this point for me to make fact-based comments on the extent to which these efforts at decolonizing psychology and reconfiguring it for African settings has infiltrated mainstream praxis in African universities or, specifically, Nigerian universities. My main excuse is the palpable dearth of data on the matter or the reluctance to explore the literature (an exercise which I do not find central to my tasks). However, I might safely say that though this call for disciplinary relevance has not gone unheeded, as attested to by the literature base containing hundreds of works criticizing Eurocentrism in psychology, and a growing interest in the discourse of Afrocentrism, there are a number of reasons why I think decolonization efforts within the field (and, more limitedly, within Nigerian universities) are still severely limited and constrained. I hope to establish this with a few statements.

For one, the hegemony of positivism still looms large over the academic landscape in Africa, constraining or delegitimizing the exploration of subjectivities and the local flourishing of indigenous narratives. The top-down hierarchies of quantitative researching means that psychological theories, tests and assumptions are perpetually sustained to the unfortunate silencing of narratives grounded in the lived-out experiences of African communities. Correcting these anomalies goes beyond standardizing tests or creating new ones with flamboyant African names; what is probably needed is a critical assessment of our assumptions about science and research, a rebuttal of the professional elitism that has served to condemn research praxis to the domains of political posturing and distanced scholastic output from social relevance. This will most definitely involve an openness to alternative research paradigms. Naidoo (1996) sympathetically points out that:

Both emic and qualitative research methodologies lend themselves more fully to a dynamic understanding of culturally specific behaviour and present important alternatives and extensions to entrenched research traditions.

Of course, psychology departments across the continent still prefer the safe, ensconced traditions of research in which questions are set prior to engagement with the 'subjects' (or whatever politically correct terminology is now given to replace this, and thus minimize the political imbalances of the research encounter) – and this, for many reasons: quantification looks and feels 'more scientific' than the stories of a young girl trapped within the walls of a mental institution;

research institutes still set the agenda for research and continue to reward mainstream praxis over and above new forms of research.

Even more invisible and threatening to the promise buried in, or represented by, the space now filled by Western psychology in African universities is the very notion of the university itself. It is worth mentioning that I think the idea of a university was developed for a time and space different from ours. The economic circumstances of the industrial revolution in Europe helped spawn this strand of modern public education. Whatever the merits of the university system or higher education, its universal hegemony has helped silence or demonize other forms of indigenous education, and reared an empty elitism divorced from the social realities and values of Africans – itself perpetuating the dynamics of neo-colonialism.

Not only have the social sciences classified the world in ways that facilitated colonial rule, they have also failed to challenge the racial, sexual and nationalist classifications that have been developed through popular movements and discourse. This is why we should problematise social science with a view of dismantling this knowledge authored and authorised by the West by decolonizing it so that it can reflect the real African situation and realities. (Omenya, n. d.)

This monoculture of knowledge promotion, its reification of expertise and commercialization of learning seem incongruent with the spiritual dynamic of the African. In many ways thus, the critiques levelled against Eurocentric psychology have attempted to change the trajectory of its historical course by making it more amenable to the African situation; in general, these arguments have called for a ‘better’ discipline. I am moved to ask, alongside Zeleza (2005), if a better ‘discipline’ is needed:

For Depelchin salvation lies in reconstituting the practices and paradigms of producing historical knowledge rooted in the democratization and decentering of knowledge production. History needs to be freed from the stifling enclosures of specialized academic discourse and turned into a palaver, a community conversation that is critical, creative and convivial, in which the production, consumption, and valorization of knowledge are popular and public activities for any community’s self-understanding, self-definition, self-regulation, and social progress. From this perspective, then, any emancipatory project of producing historical knowledge has to be a collective process that involves, methodologically, the use of all forms of texts including oral texts and other artifacts of the human experience, and one that is based, conceptually, on a complex view of society, that understands history, borrowing from the notion of creolite, as a braided tapestry of multiple human experiences, voices, encounters, and engagements devoid of hierarchies and hegemony, free from oppressive fundamentalist and teleological certitudes.

Psychology may yet find its African apotheosis in its reconfiguration as a community ‘palaver’, not merely a better discipline restricted to the confines of academic walls and open only to the cryptic jargon of an academe. This thought finds greater currency especially when the inappropriateness of the discipline to Africa is considered.

In consonance with Zeleza’s (2005) opinions about ‘de-subjectifying’ psychology, and drawing from the traditions of attempts at reconstituting the discipline for an African audience, I make a case for a community-driven, spiritual, conversational network of narratives and storytelling platforms I have called Nchetaka. I envision this as one of many initiatives filling up the space left

by institutional psychology. But before this, it seems pertinent to re-emphasize the lack of fit between the square peg of psychology and the round hole it has strived to fill:

It so happens that the basic assumption of the dominant psychology is rarely examined or admitted. The reluctance to examine the basic assumptions of dominant psychology derives in part from fears of undermining the discipline's tenuous claims of its status as a science. That this dominant psychology is founded on and permeated with the implicit assumption that the only human reality is first Eurocentric, then middle class, and finally male in substance, represents a disregard that this culture-, class-, and sex-bound perspective is but one in a universe of diverse human realities. The perpetuation of this theory and practice predicated on one world view, one set of assumptions concerning human behaviour, and one set of values concerning mental health restricts our knowledge and understanding, limits our ability to be effective cross-culturally, and reduces the counselling process to a technicist-orientation. It also deprecates the value and usefulness of indigenous modes of intervening. (Naidoo, 1996)

Psychology is actuated by a set of assumptions that are Eurocentric in character. It might be argued that the subject matter of psychology is not culture-bound, but this is far from the case – as Louw (2002) evinces. More appropriately, he shows how the subject matter of psychology cannot be divorced from the history of psychology. Indeed, if one must understand why psychology is concerned with intelligence, emotion or cognition, one must understand its historicity and its relations to its heartland. Louw even goes so far as to imply a correlation between industrialized nations and their practice of government and the development of psychology.

The problematic influences of psychology on African subjectivities are thus an issue that merits our highest assessment – for the philosophical underpinnings that undergird the discipline are incongruent with our present articulations of African worldviews and values. The literature base is replete with essays exploring African worldviews and non-Western conceptions of identity and human behaviour (Akinyela, 2002; Azibo, 1989; Ebigbo, 1997; Ovuga, Boardman, & Oluka, 1999) – thrilling expositions which herald the multiplicities of initiatives that may now fill the space tenaciously held by the western social science. It is not enough, I think, to employ Eurocentric research methodologies to examine Eurocentric psychological constructs reified in African selves; we must attempt to tell our own stories again, unbounded by the strictures of academic spaces and the trajectories of globalizing creeds.

### **Nchetaka – An approach to African Psychological Horizons: A Vision**

What is needed today is the courage to reaffirm our stories, challenge the universalizing creeds of the 'West', assert the legitimacy of political collectivities beyond institutions, and reimagine our identities. It is important to restate that the influences of psychology (alongside the institutions the discipline engenders) on African subjectivities have done the damage of fragmenting our identities in ways that leave us without supporting fields in which we can grow and flourish as members of community. We are like Achebe's *Okonkwo* – caught between the 'rightness' of our lived experiences and the lawfulness of encroaching lords. In this tense middle of colonial silence, we have practiced the worldviews of strangers and forgotten those memories that engendered togetherness.

Like any other concept, 'decolonization' is an essentially contested idea – the meaning of which we might do well to debate today. In my opinion a call to a romantic African past conveniently hides the very troubling realities of our own histories, demonizes the West, and assumes culture is an objective reality, instead of a discursive flux. Thus, I submit that decolonization for us today is best understood as the freedom to engage each other in dialogue and controversy, the 'right' to enter into the relational matrixes that create myths by which we live – not the myopic quest for past identities or lost cultures. Decolonization is the portal by which we might freely question our social givens and converse with each other – co-creating new spaces as we go along.

I have argued through the voices of other scholars that the social sciences are culture-bound, fit only for their heartlands or their close mimics – and that efforts at decolonizing these disciplines must take into consideration the macronarratives that contain them. I have honoured the traditions and familiar gestures of African scholars who have sought to rethink their disciplines; I have however insisted that we must think beyond trying to make the disciplines better, and must reach out into the ambiguous future with courage to re-imagine our disciplinary attachments, and co-create transformational platforms that will heal the present wound of irrelevance plaguing the social sciences.

I thus offer a project which I have called Nchetaka. The name is derived from the Igbo word that means 'memory' or 'remembering'. Without much difficulty therefore, the name is a pointer to the purpose of the initiative – healing our collective memories by telling stories together.

Nchetaka is a radical way of re-imagining the academic praxis of psychology that borrows from the philosophical strands of social constructivist thought. It is a decentralized community-oriented and community-driven process of storytelling activities designed to challenge / replace the hegemonic superiority of institutionalized psychology and bridge the divide between praxis and lived experiences. The central message of Nchetaka is rooted in the ancient traditions of the griot, considered in West African history as the local historian who served as a repository of stories, praise, and music. The griot got around villages, provoking discourse, challenging mind-sets and shaping subjectivities with his stories, which were oral traditions handed through generations. The proposed project is based on the idea that western psychology is one of many stories about human identity and value being told, and that it is possible for our subjectivities to be shaped differently and to be oriented in ways that are not harmful to our cherished life spaces. Mair (n.d.) deconstructs the notions of neutrality and objectivity assumed by Western psychology, and points out that the hegemonic praxis of the social science is just as discursive, political and subjective as those marginalized traditions clamouring for recognition at the fringes:

At every stage of psychological work we tell tales of what we are up to and what we suppose we have found. In every telling of a psychological tale we have to speak in some way. As psychologists we usually choose the conventions of psychological story telling that are accepted by our peers and which are sober enough to suggest that the tale is not just some quirky expression of a particular person's concerns.

Our implicit belief has been that we are really reporting on some aspect of what is so, rather than telling stories in particular, stylised, ways to meet the conventional dictates of our group. We have been led to a position of blindness, supposing that psychological science is chipping away, in impersonal and unbiased ways, at the reality of things and events. We have not been encouraged to suppose that we are choosing to tell tales in particular ways, for particular ends, and for the approval of particular audiences.

I wish to suggest just this, that all our psychological reporting is storytelling, and often it is story telling of very limited, stilted and impoverished kinds. We do not tend to tell our tales with anything like the imaginative variety we might yet achieve. We seem to prefer to stay close to the rigid conventions that our local and recent psychological tribes have taught.

Thus, it is possible to imagine psychology as a tradition of storytelling that has carved out for itself typical goals and objectives in keeping with the situated values of its heartland – those of describing, explaining, predicting and controlling behaviour. I think it is possible to conceive of the African storytellers as pre-colonial shapers of our subjectivities, hence, local ‘psychologists’. Their stories recommended ethical constraints, shaped expectations, governed appetites, articulated aspirations as reified in the lives of storied characters, co-constructed meaning with the listeners (who also became part of the creative process), and nurtured community processes. Though the indigenous practice of storytelling today is almost fully stifled and crippled by the conveniences afforded by the capitalist moment, there are thrilling signs of a growing response to the values of storytelling arenas evinced by the number of networks and associations dedicated to the practice.

Nchetaka is therefore not a ‘new’ submission; the idea is not ‘original’ in the ways a venture capitalist might hope for. Indeed, thanks to the postmodern challenge and critique of authorship, I can say without blushing that the idea has ‘existed’ for a long time. However, I do believe the configuration of storytelling and story-listening praxis offered here, and the political spaces it is intended to fill, reveal some divergence from current options.

To understand Nchetaka, I have included a set of key statements describing its thrust and underpinning philosophies:

- a) **A resistance to the hegemony of Western psychology and psychotherapy:** Nchetaka borrows its *raison d’être* from the post-structuralist resistance of Eurocentric psychology and social sciences. The project is based on the critiques of the assumptions about psychology.
- b) **A movement away from the enclosures of the academy:** Nchetaka is a vibrant, festive departure from the lionized modernist ideal of higher education – and a rebuttal of the claims that knowledge production is limited to the university context.
- c) **A social platform for the spontaneous flourishing of alternative political collectivities:** Nchetaka is a social platform that engages ‘ordinary’ people in ways different from the response patterns to the nation-state we collectively call ‘citizenship’. Nchetaka provides opportunities for the evolution of support systems and alternative communities which shall thrive on shared stories and co-creative moments.
- d) **The democratization and decentering of knowledge production and dissemination:** Nchetaka turns ‘psychology’ into a ‘community palaver’ devoid of the kinds of hierarchies that bedevil academic settings today. Expertise is democratized and knowledge is decentered from a few privileged ones. ‘Theory’ is critiqued as end-product of research.
- e) **The valorisation of creative conversation and community:** Nchetaka affirms the harmony and beauty of conversation and derives from a discursive view of ‘reality’.

Nchetaka is especially a response to an articulation of the ‘African’ worldview and value system, which supports the view that the world is a storied place sustained by our conversations.

- f) **A celebration of difference, healing and we-ness:** Nchetaka is an affirmation of the deeply Afrocentric notion of collective identity.

It is important to note that this initiative is still in its embryonic stages, and needs further development. An operational framework is being developed that shall allow participating individuals to start storytelling circles or join others, publish their stories in ‘journals’, contribute to the care and welfare of story-listening members, participate in story-telling festivals of music, dance and folklore, and enact new spaces in keeping with their creative energies.

### **My contributions to the discourse: A personal narrative**

It might be helpful to situate my offerings in a reflexive section – hence, this final part of the essay. Here, I offer my own personal trajectories and stories to come to some form of closure about my struggles to situate myself in the past within what I now perceive as the structural irrelevance of the social sciences in Africa.

I graduated summa cum laude from one of Nigeria’s prestigious private universities in 2006. My affinities to cerebral exercises, coupled with a quixotic search for better worlds and a passionate desire to ‘change the world’, led me into accepting my alma mater’s invitation to return as a Graduate Assistant in 2007.

I immediately plunged into the open field with all the imagination I could muster. Being a rather restless person, I freely critiqued some of the practices available at the time – one of which included (and still includes) the paradigm of positivism and its logical corollaries (‘publish or perish’, standardization, a dearth of innovation, and the growing gaps between the academy and industry). My restlessness opened doorways to multiple trajectories of questions, doubt, crises of confidence and self-reconfigurations. Concomitantly, I struggled with pre-determined class outcomes and curricula prepared by my department. Even more intensely, I struggled with scoring tests and assigning grades. Eventually, I began to develop strategies to evolve pedagogical spaces in keeping with my evolving values and sentiments – one of which was the adoption of Socratic circles as a teaching system. Psychology seemed too distant from their everyday concerns and lived experiences. So, I required my ‘students’ to develop their own curriculum themselves, and freely explored the university gardens as new spaces for learning in the stead of the classrooms which were growing rather ‘small’ for our games. Soon, I began to engender a questioning of age-old identities by insisting that students give up on calling me ‘sir’ or ‘Mr’; I began each class by asking more questions and hardly gave ‘answers’, telling the class that there weren’t any real answers in the world outside of those that were courageously shaped.

Expectedly, this affinity to social constructivist thought inspired a Masters’ thesis that was both against the grain and professionally suicidal. Instead of evoking yet another arm-chair project, I developed a proposal to explore the subjective experiences of so-called mental health ‘patients’ in a Neuropsychiatric Hospital in Eastern Nigeria. I chose to employ a grounded theory strategy in codifying narratives elicited from patients at the hospital. My supervisors advised otherwise, insisting that it was never going to be accepted. Their prophetic acuity was only matched by the

intensity of animosity directed against my work when it was time to defend it. My submissions were not even considered; I had violated an unwritten rule about research in psychology: everyone used statistics, no one told stories. My writing style and approach to the subject were considered quirky, too subjective since I wrote with an active voice, and 'mere art'. I 'escaped' relegation by the whiskers – but with my sensibilities intact and growing.

Months later, I wrote to University professors around the world and told about my resistance of the paradigm of quantification. Encouraged by the sympathetic feedback I received from many recipients of my initial mail, I conceived a Workshop and set my hand to the computer in an effort to develop an arena that brought to light the unwritten rules that were hindering creativity in the university context. I hoped this event would provoke discussion and help deconstruct the givens of research. I called it the Workshop on Alternative Research Paradigms and Indigenous Knowledge Promotion (WARP 2011), and then invited guest speakers from the UK, Tanzania and Nigeria. I mooted the idea to my department and to the kind Vice Chancellor of my University, who excitedly embraced the idea. The first WARP event held in February 2011, after being cancelled the first time months earlier because one of the guest speakers was unable to get a visa. The event was a triumphant destabilization of the easy dichotomies dividing the old and young academics, the experts and neonates...the insiders and the outsiders.

Nchetaka is a culmination of my internal struggles to heal my own fragmented self, to navigate my chequered identities and come to some harmony with the contradictions hidden in my chosen 'profession'. It arises from a social constructivist orientation and a bias for indigenous methodologies. I believe we can engender new templates for reality and new values if we embrace its promise which I have weakly articulated in this presentation.

My quests for new worlds have led me to create two reality television shows, which are now entering into the production stage; my output is increasingly extra-academic. Both shows capture the need to challenge the givenness of our lives and decolonize our minds from the strictures of the past.

Though largely disaffected from the endless quest for certification that characterizes the academy, I am now pursuing a PhD in clinical psychology.

I will be using another qualitative method.

### **Concluding Reflections**

In Achebe's tragic story, Okonkwo, unable to bear the violation of his identity any longer, commits suicide by hanging himself. His leg does not touch the ground; there, in the tense 'between-ness' of Okonkwo's new position – between earth and sky – lies the real tragedy of the story. The metaphorical strength afforded us by the grimness of the scene, in my opinion, alludes to the colonial moment, when each man is stripped from his firm footing on the earth that bore him. The deep cry of those sympathetic to this interpretation may thus be: 'Give us a place to stand'. In this presentation, I have tried to eschew the protocols of publishing, the norms of writing and the predictability of more traditional forms of communication. I have examined the challenges to the social sciences emanating from some African scholars, and valorized their lack of fit and irrelevance as foundational to the need for new forms of psychological praxis. This has led to the call for the substitution of Eurocentric psychology with new vibrant forms of indigenous

subjectivity-nurturing practices, the proposal of one for which I have described. I am however reluctant to believe my submissions are the best articulation of what the empty space left by academic psychology could be filled with. It is my hope, however, that the hanging corpse of Achebe's timeless hero will provoke a plurality of creative responses to the moral dilemma of our time and, perhaps, the urgency of the moment: the need to redefine ourselves away from the imperialist spaces of Eurocentrism. It is my hope that Okonkwo's corpse will for a long time to be a prayer African peoples, of all colours and creeds, will rise to utter in unison: 'Let the kite have its perch...'

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