

**ORAL AND WRITTEN  
EXPRESSIONS OF  
AFRICAN CULTURES**



# ORAL AND WRITTEN EXPRESSIONS OF AFRICAN CULTURES

Edited By  
Toyin Falola  
and  
Fallou Ngom

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*To Dr. Niyi Afolabi and Rev. Anthony Agbali,  
two great talents of the twenty-first century*



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# PREFACE

This book results from the major scholarly conference on “Popular Cultures in Africa” held at the University of Texas at Austin (March 30–April 1, 2007). It brought together distinguished scholars from around the world addressing various aspects of African cultures, the socio-cultural, historical, political and economic forces, and the crises that engender and shape them at the dawn of the twenty first century. The book focuses on two keys aspects of language (oral and written expressions) that best capture the complexity, dynamism, challenges and the most candid voices of struggling but enduring and ingenious contemporary African masses.

Popular frustrations, concerns, new and old beliefs, and challenges facing African masses are naturally instantiated in their cultures and conveyed in oral and written forms. The continuity of African cultures captured in these oral and written manifestations (two key communicational and intergenerational venues of knowledge transmission) that bridge “the old and the new,” “the past and the present” and foretell future yearnings and challenges of African masses in the face of globalizing forces remain understudied today. Yet, as the production and property of African masses, oral and written forms of language that epitomize African cultures continue to be exploited and manipulated by political actors (inside and outside the continent) as they attempt to secure the trust of the African masses and portray themselves “as one of them,” for better or worse.

Furthermore, the superficial and often romanticized treatment of African cultures pervasive in the Western media and literature (as both primitive and exotic) tends to overlook the deeper underlying impetus that mould African popular cultures (in both rural and urban settings ) as new realities emerge and new popular responses are forged. The book provides the much needed careful insights of these oral and written manifestations of selected contemporary African popular cultures drawing from popular music, poetry, literature and the media and offers a unique prism through which one can begin to perceive and study African societies, their belief systems, challenges and hopes through the eyes of Africans themselves.

Scholarly works dealing with African popular cultures have generally been confined to the traditional realms of “art, songs and dances,” thus overlooking the pivotal role that popular cultures play in the ever-evolving African political discourses, in the media and democratization processes, and in crises such as HIV-AIDS, Apartheid, and other (post) colonial struggles facing people of African descent inside and outside “the Mother-Continent.” This book is a unique scholarly effort that departs from the surface manifestation of African cultures as evidenced in their oral and written forms to uncover the deeper central socio-cultural, economic and political realities that underpin and shape contemporary popular African cultures in this era of cultural and economic globalization.

We are grateful to Tyler Fleming and other graduate students who facilitated the work of the conference in March 2007, as well as various academic units who provided funding to make it a huge success.

Toyin Falola and Fallou Ngom



# INTRODUCTION: ORALITY, LITERACY AND CULTURES

*Toyin Falola & Fallou Ngom*

## Introduction

The bias against Africa, its cultures, history and people, has a long history in academia. The representations of Africa are constructed and disseminated through images of intriguing aspects of African realities conveyed in a language that often over-emphasizes the exotic, the pitiful or the primitive while de-emphasizing complex idiosyncratic aspects of African societies that are nameless or unknown in the Western world.

Woolard and Schieffelin (1994, 61–69) argue that language has always been a companion of empire, as asserted in the sixteen century by the Spanish Grammarian Nebrija, and that the examination of colonial linguistic descriptions, dictionaries, grammars and language guides demonstrate that what was conceived as a neutral scientific endeavor was much a political one. They argue that the perceived linguistic structure can always have political meaning in the colonial encounter, and that functional or formal inadequacy of indigenous languages (and therefore of indigenous mind or civilization) was often alleged to justify tutelage.

The current (mis)understandings and (mis)representations of African societies, cultures, and challenges largely stem from inherited biases ingrained in some of the traditional travel narratives as well as in colonial and missionary accounts. In 1911, Franz Boas indicated that the descriptions given by most travelers were often too superficial and that very few travelers understood the language of the people they visited. He thus raised the fundamental question of how it is possible to judge a “tribe” solely by the description of interpreters or by observations of disconnected actors whose motivations are unknown. Even when the language of the people is known to the visitor, Boas argued that the

visitor is generally an unappreciative listener to their tales, as the missionary has strong biases against the religious ideas and customs of the so-called “primitive people,” and the trader has no interests in their beliefs and “barbarous arts” (Boas 1911, 99).

In the same line of thought, George W. Ellis noted in his illuminating study of the Vai people of Liberia, “It is new to most of the readers that there are Vai native Africans of pure blood, who created their own alphabet and also possessed libraries of Arabic books touching upon a considerable range of subjects” (Ellis 1914, 12). He noted that besides their native alphabet, Arabic was used in upper and lettered classes. His recognition of the misrepresentation of Africa and Africans in academia is further reflected in his subsequent statements that much of the information concerning Africans found in the encyclopedias, geographies, and works on ethnology and anthropology, which has been so deeply impressed upon the outside world, was unsupported by the facts and the general picture of the intellectual and social conditions of Africans. He therefore found it necessary and imperative that “the Negro should explain his own culture and interpret his own thought and soul life,” if the complete truth was to be given to other races (Ellis 1914, 19).

In 1963, the Oxford historian Hugh Trevor-Roper dismissed the history of Africa as meaningless, and argued that “perhaps in the future, there will be some African history, ... But at present, there is none. There is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness ... and darkness is not subject of history” (Mazrui 2002, 3). This school of thought, which goes back to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and beyond, led to the UNESCO project on the history of Africa which in itself was a refutation of the proposition that Africa is a continent without history (Mazrui 2002, 3). Adherents of Trevor-Roper’s ideas negate not only the overall history of Africa, but also the well-established role that old imperial languages such as Sarakole (or Sarakhole) in Ghana, Mandingo in Mali, and Songhay in Kaoga (Gao) in Mali have played as *linguae francae* of trade and government affairs in Africa. They seem to forget that even after the advent of Islam, Arabic always remained only the language of religion and erudition, as did Latin in Europe of the same period (Asante and Abarry 1996, 209). The indigenous legacy of Africa dismissed in this school of thought ranges from the long tradition of both church history and royal history in Amharic, the classical Ethiopian language Ge’ez, the intellectual heritage of Islamized African societies such as Somali poetry, Swahili (Mazrui 2002, 14), Fulfulde, Wolof, Hausa and Kanuri scholarship, among others, in both oral and written forms, to the rich intellectual heritage in Arabic and Ajami (the modification of the Arabic script to write African languages) in Timbuktu, the bulk and scope of which is yet to be determined. These docu-

ments and those yet to be unearthed in sub-Saharan Africa, produced by people that Kane (2002) refers to as *Les intellectuels Africains non europhones* (non-Europhone African Intellectuals), will undeniably force revisions of various aspects of African history.

Kane (2002, 1–3) argues that the common denominator between Europeans and some African intellectuals trained in the Western school is their Eurocentric reading of knowledge production about Africa. He notes that some African scholars' analysis of artwork, Greek writings on Blacks, travel narratives, and missionaries and explorers' accounts show that the core of knowledge which constructs simplistic and rather racist representations of the mosaic of people of Africa with their different cultures, ecologies, social organizations, political economy is based upon the Eurocentric framework.

Kane further notes that the arguments that 1) the bulk of the writings produced in sub-Saharan Africa are in Portuguese, French, and English, 2) African intellectuals are mostly *Europhones*, and 3) historically, intellectuals from the "Third World," including sub-Saharan Africans, are the product of the encounter with the West does not take into account the group of *non-Europhone African intellectuals* trained in Islamic centers of learning in Africa. Yet, the scholarship of these *non-Europhone* scholars of Africa goes as far back as the medieval period and involves documents on theological and secular knowledge written by both Arabs and African authors.

Kane (2002, 8) also notes that writings from *non-Europhone* Black African authors have been long neglected primarily due to prejudice, as both Europeans and Arab scholars with the necessary linguistic competence to study their work have often deemed the work of Black Africans authors of little or no scholarly interest or benefit. As a result, most African and Africanist scholars either considered the Islamization of Africa to be superficial or because they ignored, for the most part, the existence of a literature in Arabic or Ajami and have not taken into account these important sources of information about Africa in their work. Consequently, few historians today have interest in such sources written in Arabic or Ajami because they mistakenly assume that the essential part of sources on African history is either oral or in European languages (Kane 2002, 8).

While the tendency is often to emphasize European racism, racism and prejudices toward Black Africans are by no means exclusive to Europeans. Racist views are also well documented in the Arab literature. While racism in Western societies is continuously subjected to serious discussions, Arab racism against Black Africans remains deeply pervasive and largely taboo throughout the Arab world, and is yet to be seriously confronted. Hunwick (2003) provides a sobering historical assessment of this largely ignored plague that continues to be rampant throughout the Arab world and the Maghreb. In both traditions, the Arab

and European traditions of knowledge production about Africa, the African was generally portrayed as savage and culturally, religiously and intellectually inferior, with a history that only started with their arrival in the continent. In many ways, the legacy of these stereotypes accounts for the neglect of the rich Arabic and Ajami intellectual and literary tradition of Black African scholars, and has impeded the objectivity of knowledge production about the continent in general.

Today, it is vital to 1) centralize the Arabic and Ajami literatures of Africa (ranging from history, political systems, local economies, culture, local ideologies, traditional medicine for both physical and mental illnesses, agricultural methods, and others) at a continental level through universities and other centres of learning, and 2) study and disseminate the insights, and enrich them with recent advances in medicine, science and technology. This could pave the way for new paradigm shifts and produce endogenous models of socio-economic development customized for African realities.

In view of many historical facts, the need to break with and reevaluate the Arab and European tradition of knowledge production about Africa is not only necessary but critical if the truth about Africa and Africans is to be fully uncovered. African history has been altered by centuries of “Arabization” (from Arab slavery to Islamization) and “Europeanization” (from European slavery, colonization to globalization). Yet, whether accepted by Africans or not, and whether realized or not, race (not religion or the shared humanity) continues to be the key defining feature of Black Africans in the eyes of many Eurocentric and Arabocentric scholars. Overlooking this racial reality that has shaped interactions between Black African, Arab and European scholars perpetuates the subjectivity of knowledge production about Africa, and leaves the primacy of the views of those “who dominated Africans” unchecked and unchallenged at the expense of more objective in-vivo data-driven accounts and inquiries. If this tradition continues, the true story of the “Islamized,” “Christianized,” and “conquered” Africans will never be told.

While scholarly objectivity issues pertaining to the representations of Africa have been raised over the past century, and while some progress has been made, the underlying concern remains topical and at the heart of knowledge production about Africa and its dissemination. This is partly ascribable to the fact that the exploits of outsiders in Africa continue to be far more richly documented than those of the local people, and the tendency to overstress the importance of external influences inherent in most of the written materials continues to be widespread, a bias that needs constantly to be corrected by awareness of the achievements of African societies in developing their own varied and elaborate cultures (Flint and Geiss 1977, 458).

The word “culture,” in its primary meaning, refers to what is grown and groomed (from the Latin *colere*: to cultivate), and thus evokes the traditional nature vs. nurture debate: whether human beings are mainly what nature determines them to be from birth or what culture makes them to become through socialization and schooling (Kramsch 1998, 4). Whether one accepts the Biblical narrative placing the linguistic watershed event at the time of the Tower of Babel, or prefers a more scientific theory of linguistic evolution, the use of language as a contemporary ethnic variable (Baumel 2005, 1) and as a prime vehicle for cultural expression is hardly in doubt today.

As Ahearn (2001, 131) rightly notes, because language and culture are so tightly interwoven, neither should be studied in isolation from the other. The history of the French language exemplifies the fact that language is indeed a primary vehicle for political and cultural expression. In the decades after the French Revolution, what was being called the revolutionary “language of the people” was in fact, a foreign language for well over half of those living within the state’s territory. Later “the language of liberty, and equality” was imposed on most of the population, sometimes with considerable brutality. While replacing the stigmatized dialects and provincial languages, French itself was simultaneously differentiating into class varieties supported by educational stratification. Nineteenth century French writers and government officials explicitly equated Breton, Occitan, and Basque speaking provinces with African colonies of France, all of which had to be conquered and “civilized” with French, the “language of reason” (Gal 1989, 356).

This is consonant with Stroud’s (1999, 431) claim that differences between language and dialect, let alone even lower qualifications such as “jargon,” “speech” (“parler” in French) or “idioms” are usually the product of politics of representation and involve massive projections of power, prestige, status, values, norms, onto linguistic phenomenon at hand, showing that boundaries between language/dialect, and standard/non-standard variety are not natural or independent of human agency and political force. Rather, they are socially, politically, or ideologically constructed phenomena as suggested by Calvet (1974); Bourdieu (1982); Gal and Irvine (1995); Collins (1999), and others.

Thus, linguistic differences, whether inter-lingual or intra-lingual, may be used to identify, characterize, construct stereotypes, and define identities in the world, as was the case in colonial French West Africa. During the colonial period, arguments about linguistic differences, especially between standard French and African languages, were pivotal in spreading French colonizers’ claims of their economically-based “mission civilisatrice”; the special status of standard French as “la langue de la raison”, and the superiority of the metropolitan bourgeoisie over “backward or primitive” others (Calvet 1974; Crowder 1962; Gal

and Irvine 1995, 967). To the French colonizers, languages were natural objects, consequences of spiritual or even biological differences (Gal and Irvine 1995).

Similarly, Hutton (1999) demonstrates that an important component of European fascist thought was derived from linguistics, particularly the notion of an Aryan people with an original language and homeland. He argued that, in Nazi Germany, linguistic fascism took the form of a cult of the mother tongue expressed in a horror of linguistic assimilation and a xenophobic assertion of German language rights. The Jews were considered to lack a healthy relationship to the German language, and therefore to threaten the bond between the Germans and their language (Hutton 1999). Hutton (1999) also indicates that similar racist ideas are also found in the works of the Dutch dialectologist, J. Van Ginneken, who links his anti-Semitic notions of Jewish character and race to language.

Such arguments show the extent to which some beliefs vis-à-vis language are motivated by social, cultural, political, and ideological factors to legitimate racial superiority or achieve other goals. This “ideologization” of linguistic differences is extensively discussed in the social sciences literature (Bourdieu 1982; Gal and Irvine 1995; and Collins 1999; etc.). Gal and Irvine (1995, 972–73) argued that social categories such as nations, ethnic groups, races, gender, and classes are in part constructed and reproduced as ideologies through symbolic devices, like linguistic patterns, and everyday practices that create boundaries between them. These ideologies are reproduced by means of a variety of institutional, semi-institutional, everyday practice and social reproduction systems such as schools, administration, army, advertisement, publications (the media, literature, art, music) and so on (Blommaert 1999, 10). The reproduction practices may result, willingly or not, in normalization, i.e., the creation of a hegemonic pattern in which the ideological claims are perceived as “normal” ways of thinking and acting (Blommaert 1999, 10–11).

In many ways, the French President Sarkozy’s controversial speech delivered in Dakar, Senegal on July 26, 2007 echoes the “normal” colonial mindset and perspective on Africa, its people, languages and cultures. In addressing the view of African cultures as “static and only rooted in the past” that continues to be espoused by some Western scholars and political leaders today (as expressed by Sarkozy), Fiedler (1996, 11) defined African cultures “not as that which only has its roots in the past, but that which fulfills African aspirations, which comprise both the desire to preserve traditional culture and the desire to incorporate into it useful elements of other cultures.” His perspective is akin to Léopold Sédar Senghor’s famous call for the “Civilisation de l’Universel (Universal Civilisation)” and Aimé Césaire’s “Rendez-vous du Donner et du Recevoir” (The Meeting of Giving and Taking), in which African cultures enrich

other cultures, and are in turn enriched by other cultures. In this line of thought, “culture” is construed more appropriately as an evolving and accommodating process. In this sense, it is understood as the active construction of meaning, rather than the somewhat “static” and reified phenomenon it is often portrayed to be (Graddol et al. 1993, 23).

The numerous linguistic innovations attested in African languages today triggered by the new forces of globalization reflect the dynamism of African societies and cultures, and their ability to cope with new realities. The continuing language interactions between African and non-African languages through loanwords and linguistic innovations found among urban youngsters throughout Africa, triggered either by the influence of American youth culture or other local cultural and social realities are evidence that African societies are neither atavistic nor immune to progress, contrary to their portrayal in the global news media. In fact, linguistic innovations, neologisms, loanwords in African societies today, and the linguistic processes that go along with them mirror cultural, political and social changes. In this respect, African languages, in their oral and written forms, contain important testimonies of people’s adaptation and responses to new and old internal and external realities.

In sub-Saharan African countries today (where multilingualism is the norm), linguistic exchanges are generally triggered and constrained by various social factors. African languages (in their oral and written forms) bear testimony of the past and current socio-cultural dynamics of African societies because political, cultural and religious forces that affect society always leave linguistic imprints. Therefore, while some loanwords may be understood and used by an entire speech community regardless of people’s social group, or religion, not all loanwords are used by all members of society. Some loanwords are restricted to particular social groups due to the social value, prestige or stigma associated with them.

Thus, linguistic exchanges reflect the power relationships in contemporary African societies. As Calvet (1974, 90) rightly indicated, linguistic interactions between African and European languages are evidence of the types of relationship that have existed or exist between two communities. In former French colonies of West Africa, the high rate of borrowings from French into local languages represents the surface trace of the French linguistic superstructure imposed on the local African communities as the result of French “glottophagia” (Calvet 1974, 92), construed as the destructive effects of colonial French policies on African languages and cultures.

Because African countries are mostly multilingual where often Arabic, European and African cultures, religions and ideologies regularly interact, some groups are more exposed to certain foreign influences than others for particular social or religious reasons. Thus, Arabic words in African languages



are often equated with the knowledge of Islam and may be used by people to display their “religious erudition.” In contrast, newly introduced English words are features of the language of the “wanna-be American” urban youth who use them to display their so-called “modernity.” As a result, due to their growing exposure to foreign languages and cultures through the electronic media and youth culture, the linguistic variety of urban youngsters throughout Africa in general contrasts sharply with that of older generations as many of the new words they coin or borrow reflect their new twenty first century realities.

This echoes the view that there are no neutral words, and that all words have a “taste” of profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, and contexts in which they have lived their socially charged lives (Ahearn 2001, 110–111). It is in this perspective that the current linguistic exchanges in multilingual African societies must be construed. Since understanding any group is always tied to that group’s surroundings, which include language, customs, geography, iconic traditions, and especially ordinary practices (Bell 2002, 1), this book brings together distinguished scholars addressing various aspects of contemporary African cultures, societies and customs. These scholars examine the socio-cultural, historical, political and economic forces and the conditions that engender and shape African cultures, societies, and customs against the background of the (mis)representations of Africa pervasive in the literature and the twenty first century global media. The electronic media, especially television, have been particularly instrumental in perpetuating stereotypes about Africa. The long-running series of Tarzan have constructed in the minds of Western movie watchers an Africa that is equated with the “Dark Continent” with a steamy jungle populated by Pygmies and zoo animals (Foxworth 1985, 156).

In many respects, the monolithic portrayal of Africa fails to do justice to the amazing linguistic, cultural, ethnic, religious and political diversity in the continent. Because of the simplistic homogenizing view of Africa as “the untamed and uncivilized” continent in permanent desperate need for Western help, many Westerners do not expect to find technology such as high-speed open access wireless networks in Africa, etc. Yet, while the availability of such technological tools remains scares in the continent, they have become common in many African urban areas today. Yet, such obvious facts continue to trigger amazements in many Westerners’ mind as if Africa is somehow impervious to advances in modern science and technology.

Today, the presence of the African Diaspora in major American cities, the African intelligentsia in European and American universities (who go back and forth), and the idealistic belief that America is the land of opportunity, modernism and wealth (conveyed through the electronic media and Hollywood) have



enlivened the African youth's admiration for America and American products. This perception of America is strong among many African youngsters. In Senegal for example (a former French colony), the youth exhibits an attitudinal shift from French (the former language that guarantees economic success) to English (the new language of modernity and economic mobility). Thus, while Europe still is an attractive emigration destination, the ideal place to immigrate for many of them has shifted from France to America.

While the influence of France is still strong in Senegal and some members of the older generations continue to harbor emotional ties with French and France, the new generation feels no such strong emotional connection to France and the French language. The generation of the twenty first century of Senegalese and Africans in general (that could be dubbed the "Google generation") is attracted and fascinated by everything American, and their fascination with America is visibly reflected in their clothing styles, language and music. However, their rap music continues to be heavily influenced by local cultural and religious traditions. In Senegal, the recent coining of the popular phrase "Barsa mbaa Barsaq" (Meaning: Barcelona or Death) which stems from the illegal emigration attempt of young Senegalese with fishing boats to Spain, the new verb "mess," a truncated form of "message" (Meaning: to send a cell phone text message), and others commonly used among the Senegalese urban youth are illustrative of how language continuously captures contemporary social reality in Africa. These examples drawn from contemporary Senegal exemplify that language (both in its oral and written expression) expresses people's changing belief system and attitudes.

Moreover, the recent rejection of the European Union's E.P.A (Economic Partnership Agreement) by President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal, and the subsequent uproar and mobilization in support of his position it generated inside and outside Africa (captured in slogans such as "Non aux APE," "No to the EPA") is further evidence that the Africa of the twenty first century is not the same as that of previous centuries. The instant mobilization exhibited throughout the continent and the Diaspora to resist the European Union E.P.A demonstrates that many Africans and their leaders today are realizing the need to agree and defend their common interests, and that the future of the continent is in African unity, at a regional and ultimately at the continental level. The general awareness of the long-term impacts of the E.P.A on already fragile African economies, which primarily depend on customs duties on foreign goods, and its outright rejection by both African intellectuals and the masses are evidence that the colonial and blood ties that used to bind Africa and Europe, are seriously damaged, if not severed. The popular rejection of the E.P.A signals that the era of European tutelage of Africa is over in the consciousness of many

members of the new Google generation of Africans. To many Africans, Africanist scholars and leaders, the proposed European deal symbolizes “Europe’s new trick to re-colonize Africa” with an agreement that is reminiscent of the numerous treaties used to first enslave, then colonize, and later micro-manage African affairs, and transform African states in chronic positions of dependency that crippled their economies and impoverish their people, often with the help of corrupt African leaders.

In evaluating the relationships between Africa and Europe over the last fifty years, Ndiaye (2008) identified three main generations of African leaders: 1) the first leaders to whom Europe promised a lot, but kept none of its promises, 2) the generation that tried policies such as the Structural Adjustment Program, the Devaluation, etc. supported by the West, but with no success, and 3) the new generation that continuously reassesses the relationships between Africa and Europe. Ndiaye argues that the third generation of African leaders is headed by President Abdoulaye Wade, a man whose experience draws from lessons of the three generations of African leaders, because he witnessed the colonial times, experienced African decolonization, anti-colonial and liberation movements.

In many respects, it can be argued that one of the advantages of globalization for Africa is, at least, to have produced a new generation of Africans who are “electronically” close, acutely aware of and involved in world affairs, constantly reassessing the ties between Africa and others, fully aware of African realities and challenges, and who feels no allegiance to colonial powers, which many have demystified. This generation contrasts with previous generations of Africans considered to be Europe’s “beloved” students that never graduated from Western tutelage and patronizing.

If the energy exhibited by Africans and Africanists against the European E.P.A proposal is coupled with a true introspection which forces Africans to re-center their position and presence in the world, a presence that forces respect through acts (and not only words) as Diouf (2007) calls for, the twenty first century could well be the African century, in the same way previous centuries saw the rising of Western European countries, America and some Asian countries. Despite the serious challenges of poverty, HIV-AIDS, corruption and civil wars in some parts of Africa, the often untold truth is that the overwhelming part of Africa is neither in chaos nor infected with HIV-AIDS, and recent developments and initiatives in Africa such as the creation of Africable (a regional TV network based in Mali that broadcast West African affairs), N.E.P.A.D (The New Partnership for Africa’s Development), the recent launching of RASCOM-QAGF1, the first African commercial satellite named after the Regional African Satellite Communication Organization, Ecobank (a bank-

ing company serving about twenty countries in West and Central Africa), to name only a few, Africa's large market for foreign goods (apparently well understood by Chinese investors), and improvements in democratic institutions do give hope for a bright future for Africa in this century. Yet, while negative coverage of Africa continues to be the norm in the global media, no attention is given to the new and encouraging changes in contemporary African societies. This part of the story needs to be told.

By focusing on two key aspects of language (oral and written expressions) that best capture the complexity, dynamism and challenges of contemporary African societies, the book uncovers the unfiltered voices of struggling but enduring and ingenious contemporary African masses. The issues addressed in this book encompass among others the continuity of African cultures that bridge "the old and the new," "the past and the present" and that foretell future yearnings and challenges of African masses in the face of globalizing forces reflected in oral and written forms of language—two pivotal communicational and trans-generational venues of knowledge transmission in contemporary African societies. Languages are vehicles through which cultural experiences are accumulated, stored and transmitted from one generation to another, hence the popular saying that language is a mirror of culture (Batibo 2005, 32). Kramsch (1998, 3) rightly indicates that the words that people utter refer to common experiences, and express facts, ideas or events that are communicatable, because they refer to a stock of knowledge about the world, and that speakers identify themselves and others through their use of language; they view their language as a symbol of their identity. The prohibition of its use is often perceived by its speakers as a rejection of their social group and of their culture, evidence that language (both in its oral and written forms) symbolizes cultural reality (Kramsch 1998, 3).

African societies have developed rich cultures which are embedded and transmitted through each language, and language therefore is a central means whereby cultural experiences, both conceptual and material, are passed on either vertically, from generation to generation, or horizontally, from society to society, in most African societies (Batibo 2005, 33). In most African societies, these experiences have accumulated in three ways: 1) each African society has its own indigenous knowledge system, 2) each has a unique set of traditions, complex kinship relations, stratified social structures, age and gender relations, etc., and 3) beliefs in supernatural powers and the special place of the deity and ancestors in people's lives (Batibo 2005, 33).

Today, Africa is not merely an amalgamation of traditional beliefs, but a continent full of life continuously responding to the perennial human, cultural, economic and political challenges of the twenty first century, an era characterized

by unparalleled global exchange and an unequal distribution of wealth unmatched in human history. Drawing from popular music, poetry, literature and the media, this book provides much needed careful interdisciplinary analysis of the oral and written testimonies of the vibrancy of contemporary African cultures.

This book is informed by the Falola and Jennings' (2002, 2–3) cautionary note that “we need not advocate an uncritical acceptance of all things African in our work, but we should at the very least make commitment to reconsider our study of all things African within *African contexts*, and to be aware of the ways in which our subjective background blinds us to those contexts.” By focusing on language, and particularly on its oral and written expressions, the book offers a unique prism through which one can begin to perceive, understand and study mutating African societies, their belief systems, their joys and fears, challenges and hopes “through the eyes of Africans themselves.”

Scholarly works dealing with African popular cultures have mainly been confined to the tripartite traditional realm of “masks, songs and dances,” thus overlooking the critical connection between popular cultures and the ever-evolving African political discourses, the media and democratization processes, crises such as HIV-AIDS, Apartheid, and other (post) colonial struggles facing people of African descent inside and outside Africa, among other things. As conceived, the book exemplifies how oral and written manifestations of African cultures transcend time and space and serve as unbroken links that bind “those who stayed and those snatched away from the continent” as exemplified by African words, religious and cultural practices and artifacts in the Diaspora.

For example, the word *Voodoo* popular in Haitian cultural discourse (spelled in many ways *Vaudou*, *Vaudoux*, *Vodoux* etc.) originates from the kingdom of Dahomey (corresponding to present day Republic of Benin) in West Africa where it means “genius, protective spirit” (Jahn 1990, 29). In the Fon language primarily spoken in Benin, it is called “Voduh,” and in Éwé primarily spoken in Ghana and Togo, it is referred to as “Vudu” (Jahn 1990, 29). For many today, the word epitomizes all impiety, idolatry, sorcery, and the mysterious nocturnal sound of drums in Haitian mountains that makes tourists shudder and reminds them of abominations that they have read about (Jahn 1990, 29). Similarly, the *Santería* (which is related to Voodoo) also comes from Yorùbáland (Jahn 1990, 62). Although the words have clearly undergone semantic changes whereby their initial meaning has changed over the course of time, they are evidence of the unbroken nexus between people of African descent in the Diaspora and their West African ancestral home, despite centuries of dislocation. These are a few of the many linguistic testimonies of the survival and endurance of African cultures in the Diaspora captured in language.

While the extent to which African culture has survived in the United States is a controversial one, some scholars have suggested that African cultures survived, especially in certain areas such as the islands of the southeast, but that the passage of time, the cessation of slave exports, and the impact of the emancipation and industrialization steadily weakened their survival (Flint 1977, 443). Flint rightly showed how some African Americans have revived their African cultural heritage by means of introducing African dress, names, and even learning African languages, as the result of the impact of modern post-colonial African independence, and the feeling of dignity and self-respect which it gave to people of African descent.

Aside from being a key vehicle for diffusing African thought and cosmogony to the African masses, the book establishes among other things that both oral and written language exemplify the dynamism of African societies, and testify to “the checkered journey” of African societies and cultures in the midst of foreign influences. Departing from the traditional mode of scholarly inquiry about Africa that relies heavily on historical and oral travel narratives, the book carefully examines an assortment of contemporary oral and written manifestations of African cultures (conveyed through African music, songs, poetry, fiction and literature) to uncover the unsuspected underlying issues of utmost interest to people of African descent today.

By bringing together thirteen scholars from a variety of scholarly backgrounds ranging from History, Anthropology and Health Care to Cultural Studies, Diasporic Studies, and Literature, who draw from the most recent insights in their respective fields to address the most pressing underlying forces that shape oral and written expressions of contemporary African cultures, the book brings new and unique interdisciplinary perspectives on African cultures and societies, and firmly articulates a new mode of thinking about Africa, its cultures and societies, that goes beyond the typical stereotyped representations of Africa as the continent with nothing more to offer than “masks, songs and dances.”

As an interdisciplinary book, it consists of three main parts structured around thematic clusters that bind the surface oral and written manifestations of contemporary African popular cultures with the multifaceted underlying forces that engender and shape them continuously. The first part, “African Cultures and Their African Media,” brings together four chapters that address the interplay and interdependency between the African media and African popular cultures. The section examines extensively various key contemporary issues including the use of aspects of African cultures for political (re)positioning in Kenya, the role of the print media in altering popular actions and attitudes in Nigeria, the obsessive representations of urban women constructed by male pamphleteers in the

Onitsha market literature in Nigeria, and the way that the South African *Drum* magazine imported outlawed American icons in constructing a resilient black identity and popular culture to cope with the hardships of the 1950s Apartheid South Africa.

In chapter 1, George Ogala analyzes how the apparent homogenization of the aesthetics of global politics has significant impacts on the practice and “performance” of political power in Africa. He demonstrates that mediation of the political self has become increasingly significant as politicians develop new ways of “styling” the political self in a way that speaks both to a global political ethos and simultaneously remains rooted to local cultural knowledge. It is thus a politico-cultural milieu informed by a complex interface between local and external popular cultural streams. The author reveals how the mediation of the political persona now relies on but also expresses the complex and increasingly shifting narratives around gender, class, ethnicity, age and other, and how through them one is able to assess the tensions and continuities between the past and the present, between the local and global, and how these shape representation. The chapter concludes with an insightful discussion that equally underscores the element of spectacle in political practice, emphasizing the premium increasingly placed on politics as performance but with a shift in where and how it is staged, noting especially the movement from the podium to the mainstream and new media in contemporary Kenya.

In chapter 2, Ryan Groves shows how in the years following the rise of the democratic Fourth Republic in Nigeria, there has been substantial advancement in the realms of personal freedom and public discourse regarding government policies. However, while there has been progress, there still exist barriers and challenges to democracy. The chapter provides penetrating insights on the roles of print media within Nigeria, notably newspapers, and on how these institutions have affected the actions and attitudes within Nigerian society. In order to effectively analyze the role of print media within modern Nigeria, Groves approaches the issue from three distinct perspectives. First, he discusses the ways in which the Nigerian government is attempting to develop a national ideology through the media camps. Second, and in counterpoint, he describes how media outlets have reacted to this imposition with their own ideological crusades, as well as how these have affected Nigerian society. Finally, Groves examines the rise and development of the country’s media institutions throughout the colonial and post-colonial eras, thus introducing the recurring themes and issues that define the relationship seen between Nigeria’s government and media today. The chapter provides thus a unique case study from which one can gain insight into, and appreciation for, the vast obstacles and opportunities that exist in contemporary Nigeria in particular and in sub-Saharan Africa in general.

Chapter 3, “Metaphors of Modernity: The Urban Woman in Onitsha Market Literature,” examines the representations of urban women in Nigeria as sexual bodies in the Onitsha market pamphlets and the masculinism and masochism that engender such a sexualization of women. Ejieme Edoro scrutinizes how male pamphleteers use “masculinized” discourse of feminine sexuality as outlets for (their) urban discontent, and how their pamphlets are responses to tensions, contests, and conflicts resulting from the confounding urban muddle as a whole, and not just changes in Nigerian gender relations. The author meticulously examines how many pamphleteers conflate hyper-sexualized images of women with an aspect of modernity that has eluded their control and threatened their masculine dominance in the urban subjective space. Edoro argues that the pamphleteers seem to indicate that urban women (with their sexual brazenness and predilection for abortion) are not only profaning the sacrosanctity of “African womanhood,” but are perceived as perversions of decent society and a threat to urban masculinity. As such, this chapter provides fresh insights on the masculine ideology of modernity in less studied fictional outlets such as the Onitsha market pamphlets, and how this masculine ideology shapes urban psyches and attitudes toward urban women in contemporary Nigeria.

In chapter 4, Collette Guldemann challenges the existing critical scholarship on the *Drum* magazine during the Apartheid era in South Africa, and shows how the critical elements that account for the popularity of the magazine have been overlooked or dismissed by critics for the last forty years. Drawing on interdisciplinary sources from cultural studies and the ground-breaking work in post-colonial scholarship, the chapter forges a new critical approach and a new reading of the magazine and its swift success in Apartheid South Africa. Guldemann convincingly demonstrates that the success of the magazine is partly ascribable to the way Black identity was represented within it, a change which took place at the insistence of black readers along with the assistance of the magazine’s black writers. The author also examines how outlawed American icons were incorporated in the magazine to construct an outlaw character able to create an economically successful urban life in South Africa, in defiance of the Apartheid legislation. In essence, Guldemann provides fascinating insights on how popular American images of people living outside the law provided a perfect vehicle for the expression of a struggling and enduring popular Black urban identity at the height of the Apartheid era.

The second section, “Music, Politics, Poetry and African Cultures,” contains assorted issues ranging from the manipulation of the language of popular music in political discourse in Kenya and Argentina to the perseverance of African cultures in Puerto Rico, and from spoken poetry and popular responses of the masses



in South Africa to Arabic lyrics of Sudanese women exposing and negotiating social and gender relations.

In chapter 5, Shadrack W. Nasong'o and Amy E. Risley interrogate, from a comparative perspective, the interface between popular music and politics in Kenya and Argentina. They show how popular culture (defined in terms of art, literature, music, and related creative intellectual products that appeal to the general public and that are thus embraced and propagated by ordinary citizens), is a characteristic feature of all societies across time and space. They convincingly argue that the value of popular culture lies in its use for recreational entertainment, spiritual enlightenment, and socio-political information. Nasong'o and Risley argue that, whereas under conditions of authoritarianism, incumbent regimes are wont to manipulate popular culture to transmit propagandistic messages to the people, critical popular culturalists often subvert such intentions to aesthetically deliver creative critiques that inspire and empower resistance against the status quo. They carefully delineate the implications of these activities for political processes in Kenya and Argentina, and contend that popular culture in the form of music is a critical site for political discourse and political mobilization for social change.

In chapter 6, Frances Lukhele shows how language has been used by poets to shock society for social criticism in post-apartheid South Africa. Using the works of two key South African authors (Rampolokeng and Magogodi), the author examines the power of indecent language for commenting on the South African culture and society, an ethnic mosaic group caught between the troubled past of the apartheid system, a sobering present, and an uncertain future. The author compellingly demonstrates how these poets use language to satirize the political and religious establishment in a way that is both shocking and new, yet appealing to the downtrodden. Their works show how music, spoken words, popular culture and politics are interwoven in contemporary South Africa. The author shows how these new poets use "street linguistic register" which enables them to connect to the average person (in a way that the Soweto poets were unable to do) and to criticize the political and religious establishment for their perceived complicity in the Apartheid system and the negative consequences it engendered. The author demonstrates that by using the language of the traditionally disadvantaged, these artists have secured a place in the hearts of the wretched of the earth as they dethrone the "sacrosanct" image of the English language and all that it embodies. As such they have created a new literacy paradigm which is antithetical to the traditional standards of poetry. Finally, the chapter traces the origin of the so-called "foul language" used by these "new vulgar poets" of post-Apartheid South Africa to the influence of other local and diasporic poets, but more importantly to their poor and violent childhood in the townships.



Chapter 7, “Lyrics of Exposure and Negotiating Social/Gender Relations, Femininity, and Body Images,” investigates how lyrics of old female slaves known as *aghanii-al banaat* in Sudanese Arabic reflect the inequalities, gender discrimination and the struggle of women in the Islamic state of Sudan. The author skillfully shows how women use these songs in wedding rituals to convey their satirical messages despite the government control of the media. The author clearly articulates how these types of songs reveal the position of women in colonial and post-colonial Sudan, and their implications in the Islamist discourse of identity and authenticity propounded by the government since the 1970s as a means of resistance to Westernization. Drawing from a rich repertoire of songs from the *ghanayaat* (female singers), the author shows their influence on modern Sudanese popular music, and how these singers have opened up means of expression for women’s freedoms in love relations and sexuality, and how they expose male injustices in Sudan. Saadia I. Malik also shows that some of the songs called *tom-tom* reflect the ethnic stratification and discrimination of post-colonial Sudanese society in which Arab ethnicity is at the top of the ladder. The chapter is a wonderful window into the fascinating and lesser-known world of ex-slave women and female artists in contemporary Sudan, and the Sudanese society at large.

In chapter 8, Ann Albuyeh skillfully shows how many of Puerto Rico’s anglophone and francophone island neighbors provide shining examples of the survival of various aspects of African languages and cultures in the Caribbean. The last few decades have produced numerous studies, for example, of Jamaican Creole and Trinidadian Carnival. Although less studied, equally deserving of scholarly attention are the ways in which aspects of African cultures and the very words used to name them have survived and continue to thrive on the Spanish-speaking islands. Historically, Cuba has been the focus of most such research. Although Puerto Rico shares many cultural similarities with Cuba and its other large Spanish-speaking neighbor, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico’s most important difference—its controversial status as a territory of the United States—often dominates the attention of scholars and the public alike. In addition, past and present movements interested in romanticizing the *Tainos*, the early Native-American population, or the *Jibaros*, the peasants of European descent, as the symbol of the island nationalism have often undervalued Puerto Rico’s African heritage. Focusing on specific music and dance forms, this chapter looks at the linguistic and cultural debt that Puerto Rico owes to Africa.

The final part of the book, “Fiction, Crisis and African Cultures,” gives thought-provoking literary and cultural insights on the work of one of the most important yet controversial figures in the African diasporic consciousness (René Maran), and highlights his own struggle as a Black man (subjected to racism) at the service of the French colonial empire in Africa. Other stimu-

lating discussions range from the use of narratives made of interwoven female voices by female West African authors to express women's conditions in patriarchal systems, how records of South African libraries in the 1950s reveal that both Whites and Blacks read "lowbrow fiction" to escape from the hardships of life engendered by the Apartheid system, to provocative insights on the myths, taboos and challenges associated with HIV-AIDS in Africa, and the unique potentials that some specialized literature can play in raising awareness and discrediting popular stereotypes that obstruct efforts at stopping the spread of the pandemic.

In chapter 9, Naminata Diabate interrogates the relationship between Africa and black Atlantic modernism with a specific reference to René Maran. The central issues addressed in this chapter can be summed up as follows: What if René Maran duplicates white modernism's treatment of Africa in his pivotal novel *Batouala*? How does Maran's representation of Africa and Africans compare with those of the Whites? Are his motivations different from those of European voyagers who write exotic literature for fame or money? What do contemporary Africans and Africanists think of Maran's representation of Africa and Africans? In answering these questions, the author scrutinizes how *Batouala* constructs and disseminates the image of Africans as oversexual and idle, and raises the question of how Maran could reconcile his practical goals (critique of the French colonial administration) with the aesthetic through the novelistic genre. The author highlights the necessity of rereading texts (such as those of Maran) produced by the so-called "friends of Africa and Africans."

In order to evaluate Maran's representation of Africans, the author begins by exploring his biography and achievements in the early twentieth century. The second section of the chapter analyzes different moments in Maran's narrative that suggest primitivism and stereotyping. Maran's shifting positionalities between margin and center and how that impacts his representation of Africans and the discordance between the novel's preface and its content constitute the third section of the chapter. Africans and Africanists' critiques or failure to critique problematic appropriations and representations of Africans and Africa by "friends" are explored in the fourth and last section.

In chapter 10, Gretchen Kellough shows how female African and Caribbean writers (such as Buchi Emecheta, Carole Boyce Davies, Elaine Savory Fido, Calixthe Beyala, and others) weave together the traditions of popular oral story telling with the classic literary writing style in order to narrate simultaneously the experiences of the oppressed, the voiceless and the forgotten. The author argues that the way female protagonists weave into their narratives the stories of other female characters mirrors the way female authors draw confidence and insights from each other's work to face the challenges that the male dom-

inated profession of writing poses to them in their efforts to tell the story of their feminine conditions and community. The author also argues that the notion of “community” is essential to Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism, and that this “community” can be a site of repression, containment, marginalization, subversion, or liberation. She examines how the dialogic community offered by Bakhtin offers a way to think of how language can disrupt. Finally, she argues that, rather than focusing on individual development as does the traditional *Bildungsroman*, these postcolonial female novels of development point towards the building of solidarity among women—and the vehicle best suited for the telling of these stories of feminine community and female subjecthood is the *tisseroman*.

In chapter 11, Patrica G. Clark addresses the use of popular fiction in Apartheid South Africa, and shows how records of South African libraries in the 1950s reveal that both Whites and Blacks read “lowbrow fiction” to escape from the hardships of life caused by the Apartheid system. Despite the brutal racialization of society, popular fiction served as a unifying factor between the antagonist groups as both Blacks and Whites purchased and read the same works such as mysteries, romance, detective novels, thrillers and Westerns in order to escape the negative effects of the officially segregated society. The author rightly indicates that, while many scholars have noted the contribution of the magazine *Drum* to South African literature, culture and identity, fewer have noted the contribution of *Drum* to African literacy. Literacy among Black South Africans was by no means as widespread as it was among Whites, and some of the appeal of the pulp fiction read by Colored and Africans may be attributed to the fact that there was little else available at an easy readability level. *Drum* thus drew in readers for whom English was not a first or second language through its popular subject matter, and retained them through its simple, easy-to-read text.

In chapter 12, “Working to Erase Misconceptions: The New Literature of AIDS in Africa,” Jessica Achberger addresses HIV-AIDS, the cultural misconceptions and impacts of the virus in southern Africa. The chapter provides a thought-provoking discussion on how selected authors have used literature to promote awareness about the disease, and to discredit the cultural taboos associated with it. The author draws shrewd parallelisms between some contemporary works of fiction and non-fiction dealing with the disease from the southern African region, particularly South Africa, and the taboos and misconceptions associated with HIV-AIDS when it first surfaced in the United States in the 1980s. Using sad and poignant examples such as Gugu Dlamini, a woman who was stoned to death after admitting her HIV positive status, the author shows how the stigma associated with HIV-AIDS can result in hatred, discrimination or worse. Drawing from American and South African literature pertaining to taboos and miscon-

ceptions associated with the disease, the author concludes with insightful suggestions for a new literature about HIV-AIDS awareness and its potential for positive changes of attitude vis-à-vis the disease in the continent.

By rigorously drawing from various oral and written forms of language (ranging from traditional songs, modern popular music, fiction, print media, literature, etc.) that mirror the current state and trajectory of African societies and cultures, the superficial and often romanticized treatment of “static, primitive and exotic Africa” is factually confronted, and some justice is partially done to the underlying impetus that mould African popular cultures (in both rural and urban settings alike) as new realities emerge and new popular responses are forged. As such, the book departs from the reflection of African cultures (instantiated in oral and written forms) to unearth the socio-cultural, economic and political factors that underpin and continuously shape the popular culture landscape in Africa in this era of cultural and economic globalization. Ultimately, the book demonstrates, as in the case of Japan (Jahn 1990, 12) and other countries, that Africans can appropriate and are indeed appropriating modernity and the complexities that come along with it, without abandoning the traditional cultures that underpin their societies as they respond to the new challenges and realities prompted by the current political, economic and cultural forces of globalization. In many respects, the book unequivocally demonstrates that “the Africa of Tarzan” with its untamed jungles and beasts pervasive in the Western media and imagination is nowhere to be found but in illusions (Ngom 2005, 164).

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