

African Thought Leadership: Writing as/for Resistance

by

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When we consider the act and process of writing, we also understand that script is one of the earliest expressions of human movement towards the future as a foundational stepping stone of the discourse around writing and being in writing. This feature of what we call writing has remained central to the meanings/uses as well as the challenges that writing and being a writer means and has become.



Because script/text is so powerful in terms of human progress, as a tool of communication, of political expression and transformation, writing and being a writer – one who speaks about society either to maintain the status quo or as a Revolutionary - the script has always been deeply contested and remains a dangerous practice for Africans who bring the notion and practice of thought leadership to writing.

I want to speak very briefly to these two features of Writing as a Process, and Writing as Being; as a Revolutionary Choice and Practice.

As I have already intimated, writing is central to the designation of societies as social formations that have withstood the vagaries of history. Only those societies that were able to grow and expand socially and economically; that were able to manage the political tensions and ruptures related to internal and external factors in ethical ways; and to create inclusive systems and practices that generated social cohesion, only these societies have scripts that speak to those historical narratives of social survival.

The evidence of survival takes various forms – rock art (I have a problem with this popular expression because it does not immediately acknowledge this art form as script), stone tablets; books in papyrus (invented in Africa, although this is often erased by the claim that Africans did not have either an alphabet or written texts – or because Egypt is treated as though it is not in Africa), scripts on artefacts like vases etc.; and of course the tomes that have been rescued from obscurity in the basements of western museums.

However, on the African continent, many of these scripts, which memorialized and documented our journey of social progress, were either destroyed at the moment of colonial encounter and or taken away to be hidden in museums and archives that are located in the societies of the west (and east). Much of Africa's historical script about human progress on the continent, lies behind glass boxes in western museums, guarded by state of the art security systems, and despite many decades of polite negotiation for the return of these scripts, most remain as highly valued items of so-called 'human heritage' which supposedly cannot be cared for or valued by Africans. This claim that only westerners can preserve what is now called 'human heritage' – is directly linked with the perpetuation of a lie that Africans were left out of Historical Canon of Human Knowledge.

The work of retrieving this heritage as uniquely African, and belonging to Africa – being an African - is a crucial part of debunking the myth that we did not and do not write. The Greeks have been more successful in retrieving their archaeological scripts and artefacts, maybe because they have become more European in more recent times, even though the contestation over who is really European remains the quintessential barb in the core of European identity to the present time.



Therefore, while we have been able to retrieve and retain some of the critical texts that denounce a colonial lie that Africans did not have any historical or textual archive worth considering, most Africans still do not know of the history of the text as an African marker of our long history. One such treasure is the Timbuktu Manuscripts and here we must thank the Patron again for his prescience and courage in

insisting upon the recognition and preservation of such scripts. More recently, the manuscripts have been threatened by a new form of colonisation – the rising scourge of Islamic Fundamentalism, which aims to erase any history that contradicts their totalitarian script of Arab supremacy.

We have to become more engaged in the protection of the Timbuktu Manuscripts and the knowledge they encompass, mainly because their significance is a central tenet of the African Renaissance; they are essential to our becoming Africans in new and contemporary ways that are organically linked to our pasts; as Africans who carry many identities and knowledge experiences.

This must become a key activity of TMALI leadership. We must speak with our colleagues, peers, children, communities about the fact that Africans had developed alphabets in various parts of the continent. We must search for the information and evidence and make this knowledge an important part of our conversations at family gatherings and various social opportunities – we must reiterate our past and a present as knowledge producers and leaders of our own destinies.

Therefore, it becomes clear to us once we understand the significance of script – textual and social – in the African journey to where we are - that we have been writing and communicating through text for as long as human memory exists; it becomes clear that this evidence became a threat to the myths and practices of racial and gendered supremacy; and we realise that the text was and remains central to struggles for liberation and transformation in all our African societies - beyond the continent – to every corner of the planet where we live, work and struggle for dignity as Africans.

This leads me to the next point of my discussion: Writing as Being, and some of the ways in which becoming a Writer and living the being of Writing, is both a challenge and a gift that we bequeath ourselves as Africans, as TMALITES.

I could not possibly speak to being a writer without focusing on the exclusions that accompany Writing and being a Writer, exclusions that express ones relationships with the State . When one writes in support of the State and the status quo, one is embraced and celebrated by those who occupy the State as a site of power and wealth, and those who enjoy privilege from a particular type of society.

However, if one writes against the status quo – against Patriarchal privilege and plunder; against the exploitation and suppression of women in the domestic and public arenas; against the misappropriation of public resources for the expansion of military systems and repressive infrastructures of the state which are used to violate and subordinate the working people in the main; if one writes as resistance to unequal and exploitative systems and practices, one becomes vilified and excluded. Such a writer – who names herself Feminist and Radical as an African woman, as a human being who occupies the African identity in new and contemporary ways – becomes a ‘freak’, a strange woman who is willful, indecent, westernised, male-hating, and eventually unAfrican. We often think of Europeans as Othering us, the Africans; or as Males Othering Women; Able-bodied humans Othering physically challenged humans. Yet so many Africans other Radical Africans as unAfrican.

The notion and reality of Contemporary Africa, which is marked by the longest scripted memory we have of African resistance to colonialism and slaving, is replete with texts written by Africans as Resistance/for Resistance – and most of these known texts are written by males. Of course there is Micere Mugo, Miriam Thladi, Loretta Ngcobo; Ama Ata Aidoo; Nawal El Saadawi, Chimamanda Ngozi, and many more. Nonetheless, male writers are projected into the future of Africa as the knowers (look at the covers of ‘The Thinker Magazine’); they are positioned as the quintessential expression of who the African is; what Africa means, is, what it will become. Women generally, and women who write in particular are largely relegated to the margins of writing/textuality/narration and knowledge creation and retrieval. This is a known fact – even if most Africans (women and men) would like to pretend that this is just a fabrication by a radical woman.

The dis-ease that this critique causes in an audience is often suppressed through denial; through a sense of annoyance; dismissal through a laugh, a smirk; by waiting until the speech is over and one can release their sense of indignation. When Ngugi wa Thiong began writing in his indigenous language, Kikuyu, he was vilified by certain male African writers (because he was reminding them of the hegemony of colonial languages like French and English); he was making those who define and own the literary canon uneasy through his ‘nativism’; but he was also embraced by those Africans who had the courage to unlearn self-hatred and to transform their identities into Writers who use writing as resistance /for transformation of the self and of our societies.

However, in spite of his revolutionary stance in terms of the use of indigenous language as a revolutionary expression of Writing as Resistance, Ngugi continued to use the male protagonist as the knower and voice of being African, and to represent women in his novels in conventional and basically conservative ways. He remained Patriarchally male in his African identity as a Writer – and this partiality in his identity as a contemporary African writer has meant that his work remains incomplete and exclusionary. It is rare to read the work of a male African writer which centers and celebrates women as much more than mothers, wives, daughters, concubines, prostitutes...all the stereotypes that populate popular media in general. Ouseman Sembene is a rarely exception to this common patriarchal masculinism in African literary and prose writing.

Writing uses script as speech, with language as the voice through which ideas and knowledge are stated and transmitted. The language we use can either keep us in the cave – stuck in the past, unable to move with time into new and changed personal and social spaces or, it can be a key part of our experiences of *Freedom*.

When we use language as a fossil, as an sacred cow that enables us to remain ‘safe’ as Africans (viz Others); as women (viz males) for example, then we are bound to remain in those sites of power and oppression that constrain and incarcerate us; and we are bound to come up against new ideas and lifestyles as signals of confrontation and with fear. Here I am using the notion of being bound as a double entendre to iterate the dynamic and passivity of movement versus stasis.

If we treat language as a refuge from the imperative of changing the discursive spaces within which we speak, think, and imagine ourselves, we will continue to use the male pronoun as the norm, as an unchallengeable given. It is a norm that conflates women, Queers, people in general, ability-challenged individuals and communities, and which insists that we are all Patriarchal males (man means everyone). If we remain in this masculinist hegemonic thinking space, we will not see or be enriched by the heterogeneous communities that make up the diversity of this continent/world. This male privileging practice is called Androcentricity – the centering males. Examples of this conflation are the use of He, mankind, chairman, images of males in passports of a future Africa, Africa as heteronormative – i.e. homosexuality and Queerness is ‘western’; male privileged as culture (and untouchable) etc.

From the earliest memory I have of reading and writing, I realized the power of saying what I thought about being a girl and later a woman; of overcoming the fear of being chastised and excluded for having different views and opinions about my life and about the society; of recognising that writing is voice, and that there is power and a sense of freedom that comes from particular words, and from saying them through speech and text. Naming myself Radical and Feminist brings a particular power to my identity and existence as an Woman and an African.

Writing as resistance is writing against patriarchal claims that women do not know anything – that we exist to serve men, to accept sexual and domestic impunity as culture and as African normality. Writing and speaking against normativity requires that I insist upon my individuality and my particularities – as a female, woman, intellectual, writer, activist, Vegan, and radical African Feminist.

I would have loved to speak for a while about the commodification of African written words – and the exploitative nature of capitalist publishing. Let me just say that in writing as resistance, I have gifted my intellectual property to the African Commons – and my pieces are readily available on the net and in documentation centers that archive the work of African women writers and scholars. For example, the Southern African Political Economic Series Trust in Harare.

So we see that while writing is a key element in our contemporarity as Africans – who have been writing as resistance to colonialism and neo-colonialism, neoliberalism and continuing western hegemony in its various forms. Unless we can re-conceptualize the meaning and practices of *Writing as/for Resistance* towards achieving the fullest inclusiveness – in every sense of social existence – we will be travelling a partial journey that will not take us to the desired destination of living in an Africa that is dignified and free.

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<http://thabombekiafricanleadershipinstitute.blogspot.com/2016/01/african-thought-leadership-writing.html>