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DECOLONIZING AFRICAN KNOWLEDGE

Addressing the consequences of European slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism on African history, knowledge, and its institutions, this innovative book applies autoethnography to the understanding of African knowledge systems. Considering the "Self" and Yoruba Being (the individual and the collective) in the context of the African decolonial project, Falola strips away Eurocentric influences and interruptions from African epistemology. Avoiding colonial archival sources, it grounds itself in alternative archives created by memory, spoken words, images, and photographs to look at the themes of politics, culture, nation, ethnicity, satire, poetics, magic, myth, metaphor, sculpture, textiles, hair, and gender. Vividly illustrated in color, it uses diverse and novel methods to access an African way of knowing. Exploring the different ways that a society understands and presents itself, this book highlights convergence, enmeshing private and public data to provide a comprehensive understanding of society, public consciousness, and cultural identity.

TOYIN FALOLA is Professor of History, University Distinguished Teaching Professor, and the Jacob and Frances Sanger Mossiker Chair in the Humanities at the University of Texas at Austin. He had served as the General Secretary of the Historical Society of Nigeria, the President of the African Studies Association, Vice-President of UNESCO Slave Route Project, and the Kluge Chair of the Countries of the South, Library of Congress. He is a member of the Scholars' Council, Kluge Center, the Library of Congress. He has received over thirty lifetime career awards and fifteen honorary doctorates. He has written extensively on African knowledge systems, including *Religious Beliefs and Knowledge Systems in Africa* (2021), *African Spirituality, Politics and Knowledge Systems: Sacred Words and Holy Realm* (2021), and *Decolonizing African Studies: Knowledge Production, Agency and Voice* (2022). He is also the series co-editor for Cambridge University Press's series *African Identities*.

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AFRICAN IDENTITIES: PAST AND PRESENT

GENERAL EDITORS

Toyin Falola, *The University of Texas at Austin*
Carina Ray, *Brandeis University*

African Identities: Past and Present offers scholars a unique publishing platform for exploring the multivalent processes through which collective identities have come into being. Books in this series probe the work that African identities have been made to do, the varied investments that historical and contemporary actors have made in them, and the epistemological dilemmas and intellectually fraught politics of writing about such contingent categories of being. The focus on African identities makes clear the series' commitment to publishing histories of the complex and ongoing processes of identity formation through which Africans have taken on shared senses of being. This series calls upon its authors to unpack the flexible, fluid, contingent, and interactive nature of collective African identities, while also exploring how historical actors have alternatively sought to delimit, expand or otherwise challenge the boundaries of such identities.

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DECOLONIZING AFRICAN KNOWLEDGE

Autoethnography and African Epistemologies

TOYIN FALOLA
University of Texas, Austin

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For
Adanna and Damilare Bello, One Union, Blessed Future
and
Kaosarat and Ibrahim Odugbemi, May Allah's Blessing Be
Upon You.

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NOTES ON LANGUAGE AND ORTHOGRAPHY

This book uses many Yorùbá words, explaining their meanings on the first mention, providing translations where necessary, and using them as key entry points to long analyses. As a tonal language, each syllable has a low, medium and high pitch, which affects the meanings of words. In recent orthography, sh has been replaced with a dot under the s (ṣ). Where dots are under e and o, they indicate shorter sounds. The overarching idea behind the design of orthography is the possibility of devising symbols (in this case, letters) to represent each significant sound of a language to ensure there is at least a one-to-one relation between sounds and the symbol that represents them – bearing in mind that humans started as speaking beings, and writing is a later development. Thus, to avoid the ambiguity resulting from the use of similar letters for different sounds of Yorùbá, particularly [ʃ, ɛ, ɔ] written as **[ṣ, ẹ, ọ]** and their relative: [s, e, o] written as **[s, e, o].** Things become quickly complicated because there is a limited set of letters available in the Roman/Latin alphabet to be adopted. As a result, additional signs (technically, diacritics) above, below, beside, and before are being added to the alphabet. Meanwhile, convenience and familiarity are traded for esoteric symbols. From afar and to untrained eyes, **[ṣ, ẹ, ọ]** and **[s, e, o]** could be mistaken as being the same.

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PREFACE

Decolonizing African Knowledge: Autoethnography and African Epistemologies demonstrates how autoethnography can enhance the study of Africa. Its fundamental features as a research tool provide channels to and for foregrounding and consolidating subaltern perspectives in the mainstream, that is, as central, especially outside the hegemony of Western methodologies and perspectives in the study of African cultures and knowledge forms. It also substantiates the work of African scholars decolonizing African knowledge and knowledge-producing centers by providing effective alternative strategies, methods, or methodologies.

The pervasiveness and absolute hegemony of the West and its philosophies in African countries – where a Western presence has become a metastatic cancer eating away at centuries-old traditions and the knowledge they hold – demands alternative, innovative, and sometimes far-reaching approaches to sustain African heritage and culture. The continuous Western infiltration, encroachment, and takeover of Africa, even after the institutions of slavery and colonialism have supposedly been halted, can be seen in the insurmountable presence and influence of Western capitalism and culture on the continent.

Western capitalism controls the direction and ethics of research, along with the knowledge, benefits, and profits gained from that research or the use to which such research and its findings are put. It provides the methodologies, principles, and philosophies that shape research on Africa. These allow research on Africa to be guided by Western modes and systems of thinking or rethinking phenomena, displacing them (African phenomena) outside of their natural, cultural scope. Sadly, Africa's position in the global matrix of power requires African researchers – whether Western trained or continental – to rely on these Western-derived methodologies and principles in their research engagement with African cultures. This perpetuates the conditions of coloniality that sustain the West's domineering presence in Africa. The condition of coloniality expresses itself in several ways and sustains several unequal equations or relational inequalities: it could be the objective researcher versus the voiceless African subject unable to shape the direction of discourse; the consideration of African culture as something only capable of

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producing data that researchers interpret from Eurocentric perspectives; the use of Western theories to examine African realities; or in claims of ethical concerns regarding researchers who also serve as subjects of research.

Knowledge fuels national progress and defines a nation's identity. The methods of producing such knowledge determine its relevance, uses, and outcomes. This makes it counterproductive to base the knowledge that defines Africa solely on outsiders' perspectives. Using Western concepts to generate knowledge about Africa can sabotage decolonial efforts because of their sometimes authoritarian, totalizing, and overly presumptuous conclusions about Africa, allowing for omissions, errors, sweeping generalizations, and provincial or prejudicial perspectives to form the foundation of African knowledge and knowledge about Africa. In this situation, that which is presented as African knowledge runs contrary to the realities, needs, and potential of African cultures.

Decolonizing African Knowledge: Autoethnography and African Epistemologies builds a connection between autoethnography and how Africa is and can be studied. The narratives it presents, which also foreground its argument, suggest that an insider's perspective can be merged with the rigor and principles of research to re-determine how African epistemologies are pushed to the center of global knowledge production. These perspectives can take any form, from autobiographical narratives to archived/archival and culturally relevant items. The book demonstrates that archival materials can serve as the basis for critical introspection on African culture. In doing this, individuality is expanded and retooled to reflect on the larger cultural framework.

This book presents an argument that cultural items, including sculptures, textiles, paintings, and photographs, can be transformed from archived materials into cultural vehicles, while also retaining their place as items within a personal collection. One implication of this book's argument on decolonizing African knowledge through autoethnography is that the experiences constituting an autobiography or life narrative can be reflected upon to critically interrogate the culture that shaped them. With the intent of emphasizing these experiences and the knowledge they represent as culturally significant, African epistemologies – serving as the bedrock of experiential knowledge – can be accentuated beyond the repressive allowances of Western-oriented research paradigms.

The book also serves as a litmus test for the decolonial power inherent in autoethnography, revealing how autoethnography can transform personal items into cultural vehicles, and how an archive can be approached, read, assessed, and accessed as a tool or prism for interrogating the larger culture. It focuses on Yorùbá culture, which also serves as an example of what autoethnography can do for Africa – its approach to Yorùbá culture, highlighting its knowledge forms and epistemic practices, without privileging Eurocentric perspectives at the

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ideological level or at the realm of the subject-object/research-researched dynamic. These encourage the centralizing of African knowledge and place it at the center of Africa and its knowledge matrix.

The conclusions, reached by merging personal experience with public knowledge while using the archive to reflect on aspects of folklore such as proverbs, hair making, sculpting, painting, singing, masquerading, festivals, burial ceremonies, and philosophical concepts and practices, reinforce the decoloniality of autoethnography. Through autoethnography, the personal learning of an archive is reworked into a tool for communal representation. This study critically blends personal and public realities, generic knowledge and private experience, the subjectivity of self-narratives and the objectivity of research, and academia's exclusivity and elitism with the accessibility of knowledge gained from folklore and pedagogical narratives. It recognizes that autoethnography is an essential tool that can emphasize and enhance African epistemologies, rivaling Eurocentric approaches while circumventing their faults.

Decolonizing African Knowledge: Autoethnography and African Epistemologies is different because it offers insights into the value of an insider's perspective, applied through any medium, when it is retooled into a critical paradigm in knowledge production or the understanding thereof. The approach it presents offers greater benefits in understanding African cultures than borrowing foreign paradigms or for an insider to rework these borrowed paradigms as templates for viewing their culture. It also takes readers on a journey that transforms personal reflection into communal inquiry, emphasizing both personal experience and belongings as parts of the public (communal) reality that defines them. The intersection of private and public knowledge in the book reveals that autoethnography can access an archive to examine a culture's foundational realities and knowledge base, emphasizing its ethos, thought system, epistemology, and philosophy in the process.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My interest in knowledge decolonization dates back to the 1970s. During my university education, both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, decolonization was the central theme. The challenge was how to replace the influence of the West on the curricular. Some regarded the adoption of Marxism as a decolonial project, treating Marx and his ideas as anti-Western. However, the real problem was how to draw from the indigenous in ideas, practices, and knowledge systems. The purpose of this book is to demonstrate that the indigenous is valuable if a systematic knowledge system can be undertaken.

To sustain various validations, conceptual and theoretical follow-up requires affirmation, additional work, and a search for new data. The validation work has been long, including my books on belief and spirituality as sources of epistemologies and various approaches to decolonize the academy. As "decoloniality" becomes a current trope, many concepts of the past, some dating back to those expounded on Negritude and Afrocentricity, were rescued and retooled for new understanding. This book also falls into this "rescue mission," but with a different approach: my lived realities merged with the life of the mind to undertake detailed research on the "Self" in the broader canvas of identity and people.

I wish to acknowledge the efforts of many scholars and friends who contributed to this work. For over a decade, Vik Bahl and I have discussed many of the ideas in this book. Some of them were even converted to verses as we looked for ways to focus them creatively. Members of the younger generation were also drawn into it to accomplish an interpretative framework. Notable among them are Tolulope Oke, Wale Ghazal, Ibrahim Odugbemi, Damilare Bello, and Kaosarat Aina. Hours of revisions could not have been possible without the hard work by Peter M. J. Gross and Adebukola Bassey. I would also like to thank, again, Damilare Bello of Duke University, who read the entire draft of this book and kept me sane through the difficult task of reducing the number of figures. Special thanks again to Tolulope Oke of the University of Bayreuth for his intelligent contributions to complicating the reading of the texts and stories, and for his generosity and kindness. In the final preparation of this manuscript for press, I must thank 'Tayo Keyede, my competent proofreader.

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The stories and objects that make this book possible are from diverse places and people. Thus, I am grateful to thousands of people for their work, creativity, stories, and ideas. From my introduction to wood carvings in the late 1950s to deeper engagements with paintings in my adult life, I have regarded objects in awe, precisely as I see wonders in words. Converting words and objects into "monographing" takes me back to moonlight stories in which humans and non-humans habit the intellectual space. I appreciate my three associates and friends in choices of objects: Z. Apata, a sculptor collector; Omo Lamidi Fakeye of Ilé Ifẹ̀, a prominent carver; and Moses Ogunleye, a first-rate artist. I am thankful to various institutions, notably my permanent base (the University of Texas at Austin), and various places where I delivered keynote addresses that supplied clarifications to many ideas in this book.

There is a unity of purpose in many African academies: the institutions are looking for the most effective way to achieve intellectual emancipation in order to empower their students to transform the continent. If this book helps to forward the quest for decolonization, the goal for which it was written has been more than fulfilled.

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