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## Creating African Futures in an Era of Global Transformations:

## Créer l'Afrique de demain dans un contexte de transformations mondialisées :

## Criar Futuros Africanos numa Era de Transformações Globais:

## بعث أفريقيا الغد في سياق التحولات المعولمة :

## Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and the Art of Endless Possibilities



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## Abstract

This essay raises the question of who validates and authenticates the standard level of one's education in order for one to write about one's own society and cultural conventions. Endogenous epistemologies such as Amos Tutuola's are mainly dormant because they are often ignored, caricatured or misrepresented in the Western categories of "magic", "witchcraft", "sorcery", "superstition", "primitivity", "savagery" and "animism". These problematic categories are actively and uncritically internalised and reproduced by a Eurocentric modern intellectual elite in Africa. Educated in colonial ways of knowing and producing knowledge, this elite considered Tutuola a simple messenger who did not and could not master the art of storytelling in the colonial language (English) and vehicle of civilisation. They denied him the right to think in Yoruba and write in English, fearing that his grammatically poor, superstition-ridden and -riddled fiction might suggest that all Africans were primitive, indifferent to western enlightenment, and undereducated. They were all too eager to label and dismiss as traditional knowledge the creative imagination that Tutuola's publisher termed "the African mind" – instead of creating space for the fruit of that mind as a tradition of knowledge. The essay emphasises the need for writers and researchers, for the production of relevant social knowledge, to immerse themselves and be grounded in endogenous African universes and the interconnecting global and local hierarchies that shape and are shaped by these universes.

## Introduction

This essay raises the question of who validates and authenticates the standard level of one's education in order for one to write about one's own society and cultural conventions. Endogenous epistemologies such as Amos Tutuola's are mainly dormant because they are often ignored, caricatured or misrepresented in the Western categories of "magic", "witchcraft", "sorcery", "superstition", "primitivity", "savagery" and "animism". These problematic categories are actively and uncritically internalised and reproduced by a Eurocentric modern intellectual elite in Africa. Educated in colonial ways of knowing and producing knowledge, this elite considered Tutuola a simple messenger who did not and could not master the art of storytelling in the colonial language (English) and vehicle of civilisation. They denied him the right to think in Yoruba and write in English, fearing that his grammatically poor, superstition-ridden and -riddled fiction might suggest that *all* Africans were primitive, indifferent to western enlightenment, and undereducated. They were all too eager to label and dismiss as *traditional knowledge* the creative imagination that Tutuola's publisher termed "the African mind" – instead of creating space for the fruit of that mind as a *tradition of knowledge*. The essay emphasises the need for writers and researchers, for the production of relevant social knowledge, to immerse themselves and be grounded in





endogenous African universes and the interconnecting global and local hierarchies that shape and are shaped by these universes (Ki-Zerbo 1992; Hountondji 1997; Nyamnjoh 2012a&c; Garuba 2003, 2013; Rosa 2014).

Tutuola's contribution to understanding of endogenous African epistemologies is in his quest to be a "complete gentleman"<sup>1</sup> – through publication of his stories inspired by his native Yoruba universe –, and to be recognised by and relevant to Yoruba, Nigerian and African readers as well as to the rest of the world. He found fulfilment through the international recognition accorded him by his London based publisher Faber and Faber, only to be brushed aside for much of his life by fellow Nigerians. The essay is articulated in four parts, namely: i) Tutuola and the Quest for Completeness; ii) Tutuola Harbinger of African Postmodernism; iii) Tutuola's Universe of Dormant Epistemologies; and iv) Conclusion: Tutuola's Legacy.

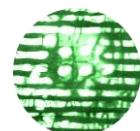
### **Tutuola and the Quest for Completeness**

Amos Tutuola, especially since his death on 7 June 1997, has been described by his fellow Nigerians – some of whom initially regarded him as "a dangerous barbarian" perpetuating conceptions of Africa as a dark continent and Nigerians as primitive peoples – as a spellbinding visionary raconteur and a storytelling genius who fruitfully combined magic with realism in his highly imaginative, poetic though grammatically limited, prose (Lindfors 1999:136-144). Tutuola grew "much too large to ignore" in African literary circles, even by his detractors (Lindfors, 1999:144), so let us take a look at what he has to offer ongoing epistemological debates on the study of Africa more broadly, especially in the social sciences (Nyamnjoh 2012a&b; Garuba 2003, 2013).

It is not without significance that Faber and Faber turned to "Daryll Forde, a renowned Africanist teaching in the Department of Anthropology at University College, London," as "an anthropologist familiar with the workings of the West African imagination," (Lindfors 1999:116) for an opinion on whether Tutuola's manuscript – *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* – had "its roots in the common West African mind" (Lindfors 1999:116). Two other anthropologists – Mary Danielli and Geoffrey Parrinder – also evaluated and recommended publication of the book (Lindfors 1999:127). Whether or not Faber and Faber turned to anthropologists because the book was "the unsophisticated product of a West African mind" (p.127), or because "Its interest is [was] possibly more anthropological than literary" (p.127), it was evident to them that the book had "a certain quality as a piece of unusual writing" (p.127). As far back as the early 1950s, Faber and Faber, a publisher, was perceptive enough to see anthropology in literature and literature in anthropology, an interconnection many an

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<sup>1</sup> See reference below to the Skull in the *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* which became a beautiful, complete gentleman by borrowing body parts and fancy clothes to attend a famous market, where he swept off her feet a beautiful lady who had turned down every other suitor.





anthropologist in and of Africa is rather reluctant to acknowledge (Nyamnjoh 2011, 2012a&b, 2013).

Faber and Faber were ready to take the risk of publishing an African novel unconcerned with the grammar and values of colonial education. In the words of Tutuola who had struggled in vain to find a publisher in Nigeria, “Faber and Faber took a risk with my work. They didn’t expect it would bag a lot of money or get across to the reading masses” (Larson 2001:20). It was a risk no Nigerian publisher was willing to take, not even after he personally translated the book into Yoruba, his mother tongue (Larson 2001:22). In a world steeped in colonial ambitions of dominance, where conversion was privileged over conversation and education reduced to producing “potted plants in greenhouses” (Nyamnjoh 2012c), the sort of authentic African novel sought by Faber and Faber was difficult to come by, especially among emerging elite Africans schooled to internalise, celebrate and reproduce Eurocentric modernity (p’Bitek 1984). A manuscript by a barely literate lowly paid messenger<sup>2</sup> of humble rural beginnings – “written in English but not an English of this world” – about African forests, magic, gods, spirits and superstition (Larson 2001:1-4) – was perfect and the closest reflection of an authentic African mind, if ever there was one. *Semper aliquid novi ex Africa* – from Africa always something new, the Romans used to say.

Nigerian novelist and short story writer Cyprian Ekwensi argues that Tutuola’s “writing was in a class of its own, because he wrote out of a poetic mind though with grammatical limitations,” adding that Tutuola would not have written the same novel in the Nigeria of the 1990s (Lindfors 1999:137-138). Driven by his determination to keep the past alive and protect his culture – “I don’t want the past to die. I don’t want our culture to vanish” (Lindfors 1999:143) –, Tutuola did not allow his lack of higher formal education to stand in the way of his mission: “So far as I don’t want our culture to fade away I don’t mind about English grammar” (Lindfors 1999:143). Aware of the corrosive and infectious nature of colonial education, Tutuola felt he might have become a worse writer or not written at all had he been better educated colonially:

“Probably if I had more education, that might change my writing or improve it or change it to another thing people would not admire. [...] Perhaps with higher education, I might not be a popular writer. I might not write folktales. I might not take it as anything important. I would take it as superstition and not write in that line” (Lindfors 1999:143).

This raises the question of who validates and authenticates the standard level of one’s education in order for one to write about one’s own society and cultural conventions, a point I have developed elsewhere (Nyamnjoh 2012a&c). Should a writer’s skills be judged by the ability to communicate in a second language or in the language of his/her birth and

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<sup>2</sup> Tutuola was employed as a messenger in the Nigerian Department of Labour (Larson 2001:13).







upbringing? The idea of an exogenously dictated level of education somewhat denies the likes of Tutuola the ambition of telling their stories. However, instead of yielding to be converted by the language of his colonisers, Tutuola creatively domesticated English to serve as a vehicle for the popularisation of his Yoruba folktales. “Tutuola took the English language and turned it upside-down, inventing new constructions and a new syntax, not so much out of ignorance (and the lack of a formal education) as roughshod ownership” (Larson 2001:11). Larson’s study of Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* leads him to conclude that “it is impossible not to regard Tutuola as a postmodern writer with few antecedents or authorities” (Larson 2001:12).

I would add that Africa’s infinite capacity to accommodate even when not accommodated and the persistence of popular epistemologies despite colonialism and its Eurocentric logic of conversion are evidence of this postmodern spirit of the continent. And indicative of a profound maturity with reference to relativism and acceptance of difference – something that has been severely lacking even in the postmodern West. Tutuola’s quest was seeking to be published, to share his creative imagination in conversation with Yoruba folktales, to use and domesticate the English language to reach himself and his people, and to employ Yoruba as well, navigating between languages and worldviews, sharing African modes of thought in a “colonial” language, and promoting conviviality between different traditions and generations of being and becoming African.

### **Tutuola as Harbinger of African Postmodernism**

Tutuola was no ordinary messenger. In *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, reality is more than meets the eye and the world an experience of life beyond sensory perceptions. In Tutuola’s universe being and becoming materialise through the consciousness that gives it meaning. Consciousness matters more than the containers that house it. Consciousness can inhabit any container – human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate, visible and invisible – regardless of the state of completeness or incompleteness of the container in question. Both reality and the universe are imbued with endless possibilities of being and becoming, thanks to the multiplicity of consciousness available to inhabit them. Things, words, deeds and beings are always incomplete, not because of absences but because of their possibilities. Faced with inadequacies, we, every now and then, invest hope, interpretation and mediation in those claiming the status of seers and frontier beings, in those imbued with larger than life clairvoyance and capacity to straddle worlds, navigate, negotiate and reconcile chasms. In so doing we mitigate the inadequacies of the five senses, so that we too might perceive what is ordinarily lost to us in terms of the fullness and complexity of reality. Mediators or interpreters are multidimensional in their perception, because of their capacity to see, feel, hear, smell and taste things that are ordinarily beyond sight, feeling, hearing, smelling and tasting.

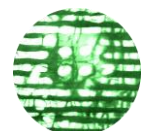




Tutuola creates such a mediator or interpreter in the trickster and composite being of the superhero narrator of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. The narrator, who names himself “father of the gods who could do everything in this world” (p.10), epitomises the infinity of a universe where nothing is impossible. It is a universe where life is larger than logic, and where the logic and reality of sensory perception are constantly challenged. Tutuola invites us, to perceive things as interlinked and to factor interconnections into how we relate to the world and the hierarchies we would like to claim or contest therein. To him and the universe on which he draws to weave the fantastic tales with which he charms and repulses his readers, no condition is permanent. Only the permanence of change is unconditional. Structures are just as subject to the whims and caprice of changing times and the shifting forms of the beings, things, words and deeds they seek to tame.

In the universe Tutuola parables, everyone and everything is malleable and flexible, from humans and their anatomies, to animals and plants, gods, ghosts and spirits. Anything can be anything. People and things adopt different forms and manifest themselves differently according to context and necessity. Something transformed can regain the state that preceded its transformation. A thing can double itself, and the double becomes the thing and the thing the double. Gods are humans and humans are gods. Spirits assume human forms, and humans can transform themselves into spirits, animals and plants. Sometimes a creature combines multiple forms of being – half-human and half-animal or half-plant, half-god, half-ghost, half-spirit, half-male or half-female, etc. – and assumes the consciousness akin to each form. It is a universe of agency ad infinitum, one in which structures exist only to the extent they can be humbled by the agency of those who make them possible. Context matters and even nature and the supernatural are sensitive to it, and are expected to collaborate with the consciousness that possesses it. Power is fluid, and so is weakness. Both change hands without warning. Woe betides those who invest too heavily on appearances in a nimble-footed world where signs are permanently scrambled and logic forever wrong-footed. Tutuola's universe of tales defies the currency of Cartesian rationalism and its ambitions of dominance.

In *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* the supernatural is quite simply natural. Gods, Death, spirits and the curious and terrible creatures of the bushes and forests take on human nature, just as humans develop the supernatural attributes of these ordinarily invisible forces in their lives. The palm-wine drinkard himself is quite ordinarily extraordinary in his capacity to collapse boundaries between nature and culture, village and town, home and bushes, the human and the supernatural, the plausible and the implausible, the rational and the superstitious, the primitive and the civilised, Africa and the West, etc. Not only is he a composite of the natural and supernatural, he and the world he inhabits provide for infinite shifts between categories through flexibility and fluidity in bodies and a capacity to be anything and to take any form, even the form of air. Speaking of the Skulls in the endless forest, Tutuola writes of his narrator: “I had changed myself into air, they could not trace me out again, but I was looking





at them” (p.27). A mere Skull from a hole in the heart of the endless forest can become a “beautiful ‘complete’ gentleman,” “tall and stout,” “dressed with the finest and most costly clothes,” and with “all the parts of his body ... completed” (p.18), by borrowing or renting body parts from others to enhance himself for the market. In its borrowed body parts and costly clothes, the Skull exudes such divine beauty that it instantly enchants women and men alike. Indeed, so beautiful was he that in a battlefield an “enemy would not kill him or capture him and if bombers saw him in a town which was to be bombed, they would not throw bombs on his presence, and if they did throw it, the bomb itself would not explode” (p.25).

Just as there is more and less to bodies than meets the eye and more and less to the eye than meets bodies, there is much more and much less to what strikes us in things or facets of things. As the example of the “complete gentleman” attests, everyone at a village market might look ordinary and human, but there may be little that is ordinarily human about all those who appear obviously human. Circulating concurrently and going about the business of buying and selling are “also spirits and curious creatures from various bushes and forests” (p.17), some of them detectably human, others invisible to the naked eye. This makes it difficult to draw a line between ordinary humans and spirits, gods and ghosts, half-gods, half-ghosts, half-spirits and all other variations and gradations of supernatural or beyond ordinary beings fronting as normal humans or quite simply interrogating reductionist perspectives on being human. When doubles mimic or parody in convincing ways, what reason is there to argue against a thing and its double being two sides of the same coin or covey? While surfaces are obviously important and often suffice for many ends and purposes, delving beneath appearances and digging deep into the roots of things is critical for understanding eternally nuanced and ever shifting complexities of being and becoming. Digging deep makes impossibilities possible, just as it makes the possible impossible. Being and becoming as works in progress require borrowings and enhancements, to render beautiful and acceptable. It is this capacity to enable and disable simultaneously that makes absence present and presence absent in certain places and spaces, private and public alike. Particular contexts challenge us in particular ways to heighten or lower the bar and threshold of acceptability and tolerability. This capacity, Mbembe (2003:3) argues, is most unsettling to a fundamentally dualistic assumption in Western thought that “every life is singular”; hence “the impossibility for a single and same thing, or a single and same being, to have several different origins or to exist simultaneously in different places and under different signs.”

The West may think what it likes, but Tutuola's bodies have meaning only to the extent that and in the manner in which they are harnessed, in full or as organs (Mbembe 2003:17). As vehicles or containers, bodies are malleable, amenable to being compressed, contorted and extended, dissected, dismembered and remembered. Auras and essences are as much attributes of the parts as they are of the whole, just as the part is in the whole and the whole in the part. What seems more important than the forms bodies take – essential or otherwise – is





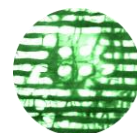
existence as the consciousness which inhabits bodies and body parts. Even when a body is seemingly palpably the same and contiguous, the consciousness that inhabits it may be fluid and flexible, pointing to a reality that impoverishes fixations with permanence and stability. The human body can be the outfit of the consciousness of an ordinary human just as it can that of a god, a spirit, death, a curious creature from the wild bushes or the endless forests, as well as it can project its own consciousness onto a plant, an animal, air or whatever other element of nature is available and handy for efficacious potency.

The name of the narrator in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* tells the story of these infinite possibilities and flexibilities, and points to a world in which being a hero requires being a composite – amenable to shifting bodily shapes and with the capacity for presence in simultaneous multiplicities, in familiar and unfamiliar ways. Bodies and forms are never complete; they are open-ended malleable vessels to be appropriated by consciousness in its multiplicity. Bodies provide for hearts and minds to intermingle, accommodating the dreams and hopes of both, and mitigating the propensity of the one to outrace the other. They are melting pots of possibilities and amenable to being melted by possibilities.

The passages that most illustrate the flexibility and fluidity of bodies as attachable and detachable containers and the proliferation of consciousness which inhabits them are those which describe how a mere Skull came to be a complete gentleman by borrowing body parts and costly clothes to enable him to attend the famous market of a town where the beautiful daughter of the famous head of the town had turned down every suitor imaginable.

“This lady was very beautiful as an angel but no man could convince her for marriage. So, one day she went to the market on a market-day as she was doing before, or to sell her articles as usual; on that market-day, she saw a curious creature in the market, but she did not know where the man came from and never knew him before.” (p.18)

She was instantly charmed by this “beautiful ‘complete’ gentleman ... dressed with the finest and most costly clothes” (p.18). Indeed, “all the parts of his body were completed”; he was both tall and stout, and had he “been an article or an animal for sale, he would be sold at least for £2000 (two thousand pounds)” (p.18). The more he did not appear to notice the lady, the more she felt attracted to him. She “left her articles unsold” and “began to watch the movements of the complete gentleman about in the market” (p.18). When the market day ended and people were returning to their various destinations, the lady followed the complete gentlemen, despite his repeatedly “telling her to go back, or not to follow him” (p.19). She “did not listen to what he was telling her, and when the complete gentleman had tired of telling her not to follow him or to go back to her town, he left her to follow him.” (p.19). Roughly twelve miles away from the market, at a crossroads, “they left the road on which they were travelling and started to travel inside an endless forest in which only all the terrible







creatures were living.” (p.19). Crossroads and junctions are as much places and spaces of hope and reassurance as they are zones of diminishing prospects.

Once they turned off the main road, the lady's fantasies turned into her worst nightmare. As a complete gentleman, the curious creature was a man of his word. He “began to return the hired parts of his body to the owners” (p.20) who had so generously lent them to him, paying them as well the money he had agreed to pay for renting their body parts. “When he reached where he hired the left foot, he pulled it out, he gave it to the owner and paid him” (p.20), and continued his journey. And “when they reached the place where he hired the right foot, he pulled it out and gave it to the owner and paid for the rentage” (p.20). Both feet gone, the complete gentleman “began to crawl along on the ground” (p.20). Frightened at what was unfolding before her eyes, “that lady wanted to go back to her town or her father,” but the now not so complete gentleman would not let her. The narrator continues. Soon “they reached where he hired the belly, ribs, chest, etc., then he pulled them out and gave them to the owner and paid for the rentage” (p.20). Left with “only the head and both arms with neck,” the complete gentleman could not crawl any more, and resorted to “jumping on as a bull-frog” (p.20). Overwhelmed by fear and forbidden from returning home to her father, the lady fainted. When he had returned and paid for both hired arms, as well as his hired neck, the “complete gentleman was reduced to head and when they reached where he hired the skin and flesh which covered the head, he returned them, and paid to the owner,” reducing himself to a “Skull” (pp.20-21). As a Skull, “he could jump a mile to the second before coming down,” (p.22) so whenever the lady attempted to run away, “he hastily ran to her front and stopped her as a log of wood” (p.22). They got to his house, which was a hole under the ground; “there were only Skulls living in that whole” (p.22). Once home, the Skull “tied a single Cowrie on the neck of this lady with a kind of rope,” “gave her a large frog on which she sat as a stool,” and then “he gave a whistle to a Skull of his kind to keep watch on this lady whenever she wanted to run away” (p.22). She would remain under their watch until eventually released by the narrator, “father of the gods who could do everything in this world” (pp.23-31).

Spirits and gods in touch with humanity feel and behave the same as humans. Those humans with the gift of clairvoyance, like the narrator, can seek to outmanoeuvre others with their trickery. When the Skull – that is watching the captured lady whom the narrator sets out to find and bring back to her father – falls asleep and thus is not in a position to blow the whistle and alert the other Skulls, the narrator is able to change himself back from a lizard into a man to speak to the lady, who is seated “on a bull-frog with a single cowrie tied on her neck” (p.26). And even when the cowrie on the lady's neck “made a curious noise” that alerted the Skulls, he had “changed” or “dissolved himself into air” before a cowrie could be tied around his neck as well (p.27). By tying the cowries round the neck of their victims the Skulls were able “to reduce the power of any human being” and “also to make a person dumb” (p.27).





When he finally snatched the lady away and started fleeing with the Skulls chasing him through the forest, “rolling on the ground like large stones and also humming with terrible noise,” he “changed the lady into a kitten and put her inside my pocket and changed myself to a very small bird” [a sparrow] (p.28).

The narrator of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* constantly employs the ruse of the magician and the trickster that his jujus make possible to activate his potency to bring into fruitful conversation the visible and invisible dimensions of his world, thereby averting zero sum games of ambitions of dominance. Being a subject calls for the unrelenting quest to enhance one's potency depleted in previous interactions. Power is seldom permanent; like game it is to be stalked and harnessed in the context of particular relationships and interactions. If power were to be rigidly the prerogative of the gods, the spirits, ghosts, the invisible world, or human leaders, there would be no end to the vulnerability of ordinary humans and their world of appearances. The narrator is half spirit and half human, hence his frontier credentials as someone who belongs everywhere and nowhere in particular. He is a veritable cosmopolitan creature in constant conversation with dichotomies and boundaries in the interest of interdependence and conviviality.

Sameness is emphasised through border crossing and unbounding and fusing identities. Even in the Deads' Town – where the narrator eventually locates his dead tapster, “BAITY,” after a ten-year search<sup>3</sup> – where it is “forbidden for alives to come,” (p.96) alives are nonetheless tolerated. In terms of material culture and sociality, things are not that different between the world of the alives and Deads' Town. Whatever difference there is in Deads' Town is scarcely skin deep, as one can train and qualify as “a full dead man,” as did the tapster following his death (p.100). Despite forbidding alives from living there, Deads' Town is very accommodating, as “both white and black deads” are living there (p.100). The culture of gifts and gifting is the same: “he [tapster] told me that he could not follow me back to my town again, because a dead man could not live with alives ... and said that he would give me anything that I liked in the Deads' Town.” (p.100). As a parting present, the tapster gives him an egg, telling him “to keep it as safely as gold” upon his return home. The tapster told him “the use of the egg was to give me anything that I wanted in this world and if I wanted to use it, I must put it in a big bowl of water, then I would mention the name of anything that I wanted” (p.101). Indeed, the sameness between the alives and the dead of Deads' Town is so striking it begs the question: what business do the dead have living at all, and curiously, like the alives? Even more perplexing is the fact of Death itself, living as a human being, among the alives, until he, the narrator, “brought Death out from his house,” upon the request of a

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<sup>3</sup> According to the narrator, these were ten challenging years during which, “we met much difficulty in the bush, because there was no road to this Deads' Town and we were travelling from bush to bush every day and night, even many times, we were travelling from branches to branches of trees for many days before touching ground” (p.99).





god turned man, thereby rendering Death forever with “no permanent place to dwell or stay,” and since then, “we are hearing his name about in the world” (p.16).

As half-spirit and half-human, the narrator's needs and deeds are no ordinary needs and deeds. The exceptional child of a wealthy father – “the richest man in our town” (p.7) – he had a supernatural appetite for palm-wine, an appetite which could only – or should I say, barely – be satisfied by a nine square mile farm of 560,000 palm trees. Being the richest man, his father could afford to pander to the unusual appetites of his bizarre son – the eldest of eight children, and the only one who substituted hard work with palm-wine drinking. The father recruits an equally exceptional palm-wine tapster<sup>4</sup> to cater full-time for the appetite of his son. For fifteen years the narrator pleasures himself day in and out with a superabundance of palm-wine dutifully delivered by his devoted tapster. He drinks along with many a fair weather friend, but when his father and tapster die suddenly and the generous supply of palm-wine dries up, his drinking partners turn their backs on him. He becomes very lonely, sad and vulnerable, like a child doubly orphaned by losing both its biological and foster parents.

Encouraged by the legendary belief that the dead are alive in the world of the living even if “in the Deads’ Town” (p.96), the narrator sets out to track down his dead palm-wine tapster. Armed with and doubly activated by the potency of his “native juju” and his father’s (p.9), the narrator was able to neutralise his vulnerability and keep the company of gods, spirits and the wild animals of the thick bushes and forests he traversed. With his native jujus he could transform or project himself into a bird, fly about and overhear conversations, and seek answers to questions to prove that he could live up to his name of “father of the gods who could do everything in this world” (p.10). Chased by ghosts, he narrates how “I became a big bird like an aeroplane and flew away with my wife, I flew for 5 hours before I came down” (p.40). The swollen left thumb of his wife gives birth to a son who “began to talk to us as if he was ten years of age” (p.31), who named himself “ZURRJIR”

(p.32), was “as strong as iron,” and could eat without satisfaction, and torture his parents the way only a spirit child could (pp.34-37).

As already alluded to above, Death might be extraordinarily frightening, but it also is very ordinary and often outmanoeuvred by its victims. Not only does Death assume human proportions, it exudes ordinary human propensities and frailties when it does. Death in human promotions has a house and a yam farm, and must cultivate, consume and ensure and assure a healthy lifestyle to stay alive and away from self-cannibalisation. Even the dead of the Deads’ Town are extraordinarily ordinary in their humanness – eating and drinking and indulging in the sociality and practices of the alives, even as they train and qualify to behave like the dead,

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<sup>4</sup> Taper





which includes walking backwards. The gods are no different, not only do they look and act human, they are quite simply ordinary, just like any other human that catches the eye.

There is always a case of one good turn deserves another in the world depicted by *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. All those the narrator encounters promise to help or reward him in exchange for services, often in the form of helping to resolve a challenge or predicament that defies. He must do something first, something that often threatens his very life. For ten years spent going from town to town through bushes and forests thick and thin looking for his tapster, the narrator encountered people who “would say unless I should help them to do something, they would not tell” (p.99). This is true of the old man who is a god who sends him to fetch a bell from the blacksmith, but which he refuses to name, as a way of making the task more challenging for the narrator. Beaten at his own game, the man old challenges the narrator to capture Death and bring it to him. But when Death is indeed captured and brought, the old man and his family flee, for they never thought anyone could capture Death, which Mbembe has likened to the currency of life, given its central role as the value and means of exchange in Tutuola's universe (Mbembe 2003:16). Similarly, the head of the town with the famous market asks him to free his daughter from the terrible curious creature who borrowed body parts and fancy clothes to transform himself into a complete gentleman.

If the palm-wine tapster is still alive in Death's Town, and if Death can itself be alive as a yam farmer busy struggling to subsist and survive the vicissitudes of life even as it kills others, this makes of Death a form of circulation and not a matter of permanent severance of links with life and the living. In this regard, one is dead to a particular context, as a way of becoming alive to prospective new contexts. Death is a form of adventure and exploration of the infinitudes of life. It also means, however, that Death and dying are processes in gradations and by degree. There seems to be no end to dying. People who die reappear elsewhere and are again available for Death. There is no such thing as an ordinary mortal, just as there is no such thing as the fully dead. Death and dying are as much a reality for gods, spirits, ghosts and Death itself, as they are for humans. Could Death in this sense not be a game which life, the alives, and those who live in the Deads' Town play with one another?

### **Tutuola's Universe of Dormant Epistemologies**

Endogenous epistemologies such as Tutuola's are mainly dormant because they are often ignored, caricature or misrepresented in western categories as “magic”, “witchcraft”, “sorcery” or “superstition” by Western and African intellectual elites alike. The suppressed are like active volcanos; they eventually erupt. The story and universe of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* resonate with the daily lives of Tutuola's Yoruba community (Garuba 2003, 2013)<sup>5</sup>, and have variants throughout Africa. These variants often sit uncomfortably with the

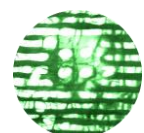
<sup>5</sup> According to T.A. Oyesakin of Lagos State University, the stories are so common a daily reality that “By 15, a typical Yoruba child is conversant with the folktales” (cited in Lindfors 1999:139).





resilience of colonial education and its dominant epistemologies (Nyamnjoh 2001, 2012a&c), epistemologies championed by dualisms and dichotomies in the Eurocentric modernity that inspired colonialism and that continue to inform how reality is defined and perceived (Mbembe 1997, 2003). If we believe that Tutuola's universe has something to offer epistemologically, that we should not continue to dismiss or will it away merely because it makes us look and feel primitive and superstitious in the legitimating eyes of Western modernity, then we must invest time and scholarly energies to systematically document (ethnographically, literarily, historically, archeologically, etc.) these universes for their epistemological significance. Such documentation should be conducted not in isolation but in conversation with other researchers and writers throughout the continent, as comparison is critical for theory building. By way of a modest example, let me refer to what strikes me as a Cameroonian parallel to Tutuola's universe (see Nyamnjoh 2001, for details of what follows).

In many parts of Cameroon, palm-wine is a prominent lubricant of myriad forms of sociality, libation, ritual and communication with ancestors and the dead (Warnier 2007; Butake 1990), just as bushes and forests are symbolic meeting points between humans and spirits (Abega 2000). Indeed, it is striking the extent to which the universe (of the alives and the deads) Tutuola depicts in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* resonates with notions of conviviality, interconnections and interdependence between the visible and the invisible prevalent in Cameroon, and that has preponderantly been studied under the unfortunate and unsettling theme of "witchcraft and sorcery" (Rowlands and Warnier 1988; Ardener 1996; Geschiere 1997; Nyamnjoh 2001). While the stories are familiar, of particular resonance are the flexible and fluid representations of reality and personhood that parallels *Msa* and related notions prevalent in the Grassfields of Cameroon (Nyamnjoh 2001). Like the world of Tutuola's narrator, *Msa* is perceived as a mysterious world of abundance and infinite possibilities. It is present everywhere – at home, in rivers, the bushes and the forests –and can be made visible by cunning, clever or trickster individuals such as the narrator of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. Only tricksters and clairvoyants can visit *Msa* anytime, anywhere, similar to how the narrator of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, and can frequent the bushes and the endless forests occupied by spirits, ghosts and terrible curious creatures like the Skulls. *Msa* is an ambiguous and ambivalent world of beauty, abundance and marvels, where everything can be found and anything is possible. It is inhabited by its own people who look no different from ordinary people, but who are actually spirits. The people of *Msa* live in even better houses, but speak local languages, just as the people of *Msa* of other communities speak the respective languages of these areas. *Msa* can be found everywhere in the world, but forms adapted to each particular context that makes it possible. Inhabitants of *Msa* are understood to be generally wicked, hostile and vicious; they are terrible curious creatures and spirits of the sort depicted by Tutuola in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.





Villains or tricksters, when they want something valuable, take their victims to *Msa* to be tethered like goats. *Msa* is like a market, complete with traders and buyers, a bazaar where many come but few are rewarded. To get what one wants, one must bargain and pay for it. But the only currency in *Msa* is human beings, variously referred to as 'goat' or 'fowl'. At *Msa*, villains or tricksters, like the narrator in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, can only get what they want after complete payment. Nothing sacrificed, nothing gained. Villains who fail to honour their debts must pay with their own lives. The number of 'fowls' or 'goats' to be paid, once agreed upon, cannot be revoked. This is why, while at *Msa*, the more sensible 'Sly', or trickster, is hesitant to enter into a contract or debt.

People also believe that anything that comes from *Msa* multiplies or proliferates. *Msa* is, above all, an ambivalent place – full of good and bad, pleasure and pain. *Msa* also suggests a place that is highly unpredictable, and where death and dying are never permanent. In *Msa*, there is more good than one can imagine, and more evil than the imagination can grasp. Good and evil are entangled at *Msa*, and no one can have one without the other. Evil is enveloped in goodness and goodness in evil, and one often gets more than one sees. At *Msa* it is everyone for themselves and the Devil for us all. Interdependence, interconnectedness and intersubjectivity seem to threaten the very existence of *Msa*; hence its violent opposition to all attempts at conviviality between those it charms and their community of origin.

In this regard, *Msa* is strikingly like the Deads' Town, which refuses to have anything to do with the alives and the places they inhabit, unless as Death gone wild, to turn the backs of its victims among the alives to their kin and communities by "killing"<sup>6</sup> them in the thousands. The narrator of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* recounts: "As we were going on this road, we met over a thousand deads who were just going to the Deads' Town" (p.101). Not only were the deads "very annoyed to see alives" whom they hated, "These deads were not talking to one another at all" (p.101). When they appeared to talk, it was not in plain words but murmurs. "They always seemed as if they were mourning, their eyes would be very wild and brown and everyone of them wore white clothes without a single stain" (p.102). The reckless ubiquity of Death and its devastations are well captured by "about 400 dead babies" marching to Deads' Town with "sticks in their hands," beating up with the sticks and frightening the narrator and his wife into the bushes (p.102). Tutuola's deads are analogous to the zombies of *Msa*, who are only dead enough to slave away in the interest of those who have implanted them at *Msa* (Nyamnjoh 2001, 2005). The surest and safest way to benefit from *Msa* without becoming trapped by its evils is to be a Wise person that is, choosing not to belong fully to *Msa* but to act as a bridge and mediator of the two worlds. Domesticating one's connections with *Msa* is the surest way of survival for *Msa*, those it enchants and their kith and kin. Just like the

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<sup>6</sup> As already discussed, there is no permanence in death and dying with Amos Tutuola's *Palm-Wine Drinkard*, so this is more like dying in the eyes or the world with which one is familiar, as life continues in strikingly similar ways in the Deads' Town.





narrator of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* who benefits from the gift of a precious egg that can answer his every wish, so too is *Msa* known to reward those who engage it with wisdom.

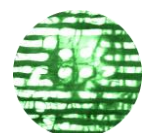
This brief discussion of *Msa* is intended to emphasize the importance of comparative studies of African worlds heavily altered and ultimately disadvantaged by the resilience of colonial education and blind adherence to the dualisms of Western modernity in African scholarship and scholarship on Africa. in and on Africa.

### **Conclusion: Tutuola's Legacy**

Like his narrator, Tutuola is part and parcel of the universe that fascinates him. In June 1997, at the age of 77, Tutuola started his own journey to the Deads' Town. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is not his only book. Others include: *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*; *Simbi and the Satyr of the Fark Jungle*; *Feather Woman of the Jungle*; *Ayaiyi and His Inherited Poverty*; *The Witch-Herbalist of the Remote Town*; *Pauper, Brawler and Slanderer*; *The Village Witch Doctor and Other Stories*; and *The Brave African Huntress*, mostly but not exclusively published by Faber and Faber (Larson 2001:22). All are contributions to his mission of keeping alive and relevant African ways of knowing and knowledge production, and fending off the one-dimensionalism of resilient colonialism.

In Nigeria, Tutuola was just an ordinary messenger, and messengers were expected by the modern colonial elite to deliver messages and not author those messages. When Tutuola's imagination ran away with him, and he started thinking of himself as a writer in his own right, the Nigerian literati castigated him (Lindfors 1999; Larson 2001). They were even more incensed when Faber and Faber offered him the visibility and recognition he was seeking, and what is more, largely on his own terms – they did not edit what they saw as his defective grammar, thus recognising his right to think in Yoruba and write in English. Through this rare generosity or accident of publication, relevance came closest to being bedfellows with recognition in the story of Africa. Tutuola could afford to live with the snobbery of the Nigerian intellectual elite, and he felt gratified to have had the opportunity to publish his stories the way he had written and wanted them published. His message was more important than the language in which it was conveyed. He escaped the fate of many an African writer who get edited out of their own story to conform to what others expect storytelling to be. He is an early example of what an African storyteller, drawing on African universes, looks like in print.

Tutuola's stories constitute an epistemological order where the sense of sight and physical evidence has not assumed the same centrality, dominance and dictatorship evident in the colonial epistemology and its hierarchies of perceptual faculties (van Dijk and Pels 1996). The stories invite us to question dualistic assumptions about reality and scholarship inspired by "the opposition between the affective and the cognitive, the subject and the object,





appearance and essence, reason and passion, the corporeal and the ideal, the human and the animal, reality and representation, the one and the multiple,” that tends to favour thinking which “privileges above all the ability to reason (*argumentation* and *deliberation*) and the will to power, giving short shrift to the ability to feel, to remember, and to imagine” (Mbembe 2003:2, emphasis in original; see also Mbembe 1997:152). The real is not only what is observable or what makes cognitive sense; it is also the invisible, the emotional, the sentimental, the intuitive and the inexplicable.

That Tutuola has inspired younger generations of storytellers in “magical realism”<sup>7</sup> or the reality of a multifaceted world of presence in simultaneous multiplicities is evidenced in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) and *Astonishing the Gods* (1996), and also in the proliferation of Nollywood films about the place and power of the occult in everyday life.<sup>8</sup> Tutuola's gripping description of the supernatural world of his Yoruba culture and indeed other Nigerian and African cultures and subcultures can be likened to the themes of magic, spirits, superstition, death, power, authority, impermanence of life, blackmail, human betrayal, constant struggles against the forces of nature, uncertainties of life, and so on that dominated the films of a well-known Yoruba filmmaker, the late Hubert Ogunde. Appearances, of course, can be deceitful.

Anyone has a story to tell, educated in school or not, and even if it requires palm-wine induced fantasies and creative imagination, the cultural dinosaurs of Africa, prematurely extinct or made to hibernate in the limbo of the Deads' Town, must be given the opportunity to share stories others might consider “a throwback to an earlier era” (Lindsfors 1999:136). Many a less fortunate author have had their stories buried in the endless forest of bad books, stories stoned to death by publishers and critics determined to annihilate the African mind with exogenously induced yardsticks of art and literary appreciation. The power of fantasy and creative imagination is an open shop, there for all who frequent the market of life, with or without Death and Debt as currency. Apparently, we the sophisticated, frequent flyer intellectual elite of Africa enchanted by the complete gentlemen of Eurocentric modernity do not have the monopoly of lived experiences.

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<sup>7</sup> This might not be an appropriate term for what the Amos Tutuola tradition of fiction offers, but it is the current term in circulation (Bowers 2004). For an idea of competing or complementary realisms and the crisis of consciousness in African literature, see Onoge (1974). See also Garuba (2003, 2013).

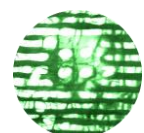
<sup>8</sup> See Location One. (2010). Panel on Nollywood with filmmaker Zina Saro-Wiwa, film scholar Awam Amkpa, and AfricaLab founder Mahen Bonnetti and moderated by Claudia Calirman. <http://derica.tumblr.com/post/2746338774/sharon-stone-in-abuja-exhibition>, accessed 02 August 2014.







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