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DOI: https://doi.org/10.38140/aa.v56i2.8967

ISSN:0587-2405

e-ISSN: 2415-0479

Acta Academica • 2024 56(2): 198-222

Reimagining African scholarship: a convivial approach[1]

The keynote address 'Reimagining African scholarship: a convivial approach' challenges the conventional norms of African knowledge production. It critiques the prevailing focus on criticism and the imposition of external solutions, advocating instead for a collaborative and inclusive model of scholarship. The address emphasizes the importance of dialogue, mobility, and the integration of diverse knowledge systems, including indigenous traditions. It challenges the pursuit of 'completeness' in scholarship, promoting the embrace of 'incompleteness' as a catalyst for growth and collaboration. The address ultimately calls for a dynamic, decolonised approach to African scholarship that prioritises the continuous exchange of knowledge and mutual respect.

Introduction

This address expands on my keynote lecture, "Transforming African scholarly writing: politics of knowledge production, mobility and conviviality", presented at the 2022 African Peacebuilding Network (APN) and Next Generation Fellows Virtual Writing

1 Keynote address at the colloquium on 'Decolonising' knowledge production in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Arts (HSSA): reflecting on a decade of the *Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences in South African Higher Education*, 27-29 August 2024, Centre for Gender and Africa Studies, Faculty of the Humanities, University of The Free State, Modlec Hall, A5 And A6, Bloemfontein Campus, Centenary Complex.

and Dissemination Workshop.[2] I have made a slightly updated version of that lecture available for organisers of this colloquium to share with you.

For this conversation, I'd like to highlight convivial scholarship as a productive way to write and publish about Africa. Before sharing a story to anchor this discussion, let me briefly explain what I mean by this term.

Convivial scholarship involves conversing and collaborating across disciplines and organisations, integrating knowledge from diverse sources, including popular understandings of reality. It recognises the importance of Indigenous and endogenous knowledge traditions that have been marginalised by colonial education and its exogenous prescriptive index. This approach acknowledges the inherent incompleteness of individuals, disciplines, and knowledge systems.

Please keep this concept in mind as we proceed. We'll revisit it in more detail after my story.

Collaboration for transformation

When facing challenging situations, we often turn to oracles or those who can draw on the past and anticipate the future for guidance. One such figure, who has both lived as a human and transcended that form, can be found in the work of Amos Tutuola, a renowned archaeologist of African knowledge.

In his novel, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Tutuola presents a character who embodies the concepts of incompleteness, mobility, and encounters – key elements of convivial scholarship. This character is a skull, a relic of a once-human life.

This skull, though seemingly deactivated, still harbours human desires and ambitions. We encounter it through the story of the Palm-wine Drinkard, who has lost his beloved palm-wine tapster. The tapster, who skilfully harvested and served the wine, was essential to the Drinkard and his friends. Desperate to reunite with him, the Drinkard journeys to a town where the king is mourning the loss of his daughter.

The king's daughter was known for her lofty standards and expectations in a suitor. She systematically rejected numerous potential partners, much like a highly-rated journal that rejects many submissions.

2 The published version of that lecture is available at this link: https://www.ssrc.org/publications/transforming-african-scholarly-writing-politics-of-knowledge-production-mobility-and-conviviality/

This story, with its intriguing characters and themes, will help illustrate the concept of convivial scholarship and its relevance to African writing and publishing.

This skull, once a prominent human, understood human nature and how to manipulate it. Recognising humanity's obsession with appearances, the skull devised a plan to re-enter the world he knew so well.

Upon hearing of the king's daughter who rejected every suitor, the skull smiled, realising that a woman with such impossible standards must desire a husband from beyond the ordinary. He saw himself, reduced to a mere skull, as the perfect candidate.

However, the skull also understood the importance of appearances. He knew that approaching the princess in his current state would be futile. So, he embarked on a mission to borrow the best body parts available, like someone seeking to assemble the perfect physique.

This clever strategy highlights the skull's understanding of human vanity and his willingness to exploit it for his own gain.

Borrowing the finest body parts available, the skull transformed into what Amos Tutuola describes as "the complete gentleman." His appearance was so captivating that, were he in a war zone, one might hesitate to drop a bomb, fearing the destruction of such exquisite handsomeness. He was the epitome of perfection, akin to a flawless article or book written by an African scholar and published in a prestigious high impact journal or by a renowned book publisher in the Global North.

Upon seeing him, the king's daughter was instantly smitten, proclaiming him the one she had been waiting for. She readily agreed to follow him home, where a strange process of self-deactivation began. Not only was this gentleman impeccably handsome, but he was also a man of integrity, dedicated to fulfilling his obligations and repaying his debts.

This unexpected twist reveals the skull's true character, going beyond mere appearances to demonstrate a commitment to honour and responsibility.

Lessons from Tutuola

Amos Tutuola, who himself transitioned into the world of the skulls in 1997, uses the skull to teach us valuable life lessons. We, as incomplete beings, can only achieve our goals through the help of others. This activation comes through

mobility, encounters, and collaboration – whether it's peer reviewers offering feedback, editors shaping our work, or a community of practice supporting our endeavours.

We are who we are because of those we encounter in our journeys. If we achieve success and then hoard the attributes that contribute to it, we deny others the opportunity to thrive. This desire for permanent completeness, where we refuse to repay our debts or help others succeed, ultimately hinders our own growth and the advancement of knowledge.

Let's imagine a scenario where the skull, after winning the princess, refuses to return the body parts he borrowed, claiming that his lenders are indebted to him instead. He would diminish and jeopardise those whose generosity had made success possible for him. He would jeopardise as well, the culture of being and becoming through others by living and letting live. This demonstrates the danger of seeking permanent completeness and the importance of acknowledging our debts to others.

Through the skull's story, Tutuola teaches us that success comes through encounters and collaborations, which inherently involve debt and indebtedness. No one should monopolise success or deny others the chance to achieve. Success for all is only possible through the circulation of opportunities, debt and indebtedness.

By using a skull – a figure who understands human desires for supremacy and completeness – Tutuola makes this message universally relatable. He reminds us of the African concept of Ubuntu, emphasising the importance of interconnectedness and becoming through relationships.

Tutuola also highlights the humility that should accompany scholarship and knowledge production. The skull's unravelling after achieving his goals serves as a reminder of the importance of recognising our debts and embracing the interconnectedness of knowledge creation. Every successful scholar, upon closer examination, is a composite – the product of encounters, debt and indebtedness.

This story teaches us that incompleteness doesn't have to be a weakness; it can be a catalyst for growth. We can activate our incompleteness through collaboration, mobility, and the exchange of knowledge. If we remain isolated, we become stagnant like the buried disembodied skull, only remembered as a relic of the past.

For scholars studying Africa, this message is particularly relevant. We must embrace the interconnectedness of knowledge and recognise that our work is not done in isolation. Our research, writing, and publishing are all part of a larger conversation, a continuous process of charging and discharging knowledge.

This process involves debt and indebtedness, where we borrow from and contribute to a shared pool of ideas. In this dynamic world, we should expect to encounter unexpected collaborators and conversation partners. Embracing this fluidity can lead to exciting new avenues of research and understanding.

This story reminds us that we can overcome our individual limitations by embracing collaboration and mobility. By engaging with scholars from diverse backgrounds and disciplines, we can enrich our research and create new knowledge.

We should expect to find African scholars in various parts of the world, and scholars from other regions working in Africa. This cross-pollination of ideas is essential for advancing knowledge production.

Compositeness as anchor in academic pursuits

I wanted to frame convivial scholarship in these terms to emphasise its innovative potential. It's not about dwelling on Africa's challenges or celebrating victimhood, but rather about actively engaging with diverse perspectives and forging meaningful collaborations. This approach allows us to move beyond simply diagnosing problems and towards creating solutions that empower African scholarship.

We can challenge academia to embrace incompleteness and reject the illusion of completeness. We should question the current template that prioritises a winner-takes-all approach to knowledge production. True completeness is unattainable, as it relies on denying our debts to others and ignoring the interconnected nature of knowledge as an ever unfolding conversation.

The story of the Skull teaches us about the importance of embracing our composite nature. Through mobility and encounters with strangers, we learn to take others in and become familiar with them. This process of internalising others allows us to export ourselves and our ideas into the world.

Ideas may originate in specific contexts, but through mobility and encounters with diverse perspectives, they evolve and adapt. Conversations, education, and cross-cultural experiences shape our understanding and contribute to the ongoing development of knowledge.

My personal journey, from the communal ethos of the Cameroon Grassfields to diverse corners of Africa and the world, has shaped a multifaceted identity. Like many, I've experienced varying degrees of mobility and the inherent incompleteness of human existence. Rather than creating a singular, linear self, these experiences have woven a tapestry of influences reflected in my scholarship.

Convivial scholarship embraces this compositeness of being. It rejects singular identity markers and encourages us to embrace the complexity and nuance that arise from our diverse experiences and encounters.

In many ways, incomplete beings populate the world, each shaped by unique histories of mobility and encounters. Convivial scholarship recognises this diversity and encourages us to challenge ourselves, move beyond fixed identities, and embrace the richness of our individual experiences.

This joy of encounters and interchanges is fundamental to convivial scholarship. I liken this process to the metaphor of a smartphone. While loaded with apps and capabilities, a smartphone is useless without a charge. In places with power outages, we suddenly realise how vital charging is.

A smartphone without power is like an unfulfilled promise, a window into a world of possibilities that remains inaccessible. It becomes deactivated, much like the skull that loses its borrowed body parts.

This metaphor highlights the importance of constant engagement and exchange in knowledge production. Just as a smartphone needs recharging to function, we need continuous interactions with others to fuel our intellectual growth.

When you recharge your phone's battery, it's just one form of activation. To fully utilise its capabilities, you need additional charges, such as airtime and data. Only then can you effectively communicate with others.

Once your phone is fully charged, interacting with others becomes a process of discharging. However, this discharging isn't a loss; it's a productive exchange. You share your resources – battery life, data, and airtime – through conversations, effectively charging up others. In turn, they discharge their knowledge and experiences, recharging you in the process.

This continuous exchange of knowledge and resources mirrors the dynamics of a scholarly community. We constantly interact with each other, sharing our research, insights, and perspectives. This exchange not only enriches our individual knowledge but also contributes to the collective advancement of scholarship.

This community of practice, this network of encounters, allows us to overcome our incompleteness and achieve our goals. We can claim success, not despite our imperfections, but because of them. By acknowledging our limitations and embracing collaboration, we open ourselves up to new possibilities.

Embracing incompleteness

To overcome the unequal power dynamics in academia, we need to shift our mindset. Instead of striving for supremacy, completeness, and perfection, we should embrace incompleteness as a universal truth. We need to foster horizontal encounters that prioritise collaboration and mutual respect over competition and dominance.

Like the skull who borrowed body parts to achieve his goal, we should be willing to share resources and knowledge, recognising that our success depends on the contributions of others. By embracing this mindset, we can create a more equitable and productive academic environment where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Imagine if the skull, after using Cristiano Ronaldo's, Lionel Messi's or Kylian Mbappe's leg to become a star footballer, refused to return it. Such ingratitude would be unimaginable! Similarly, in academia, we must acknowledge our debts to those who contribute to our success.

Convivial scholarship emphasises humility and generosity of spirit. It encourages us to look beyond our disciplines, engage in interdisciplinary conversations, and listen to voices outside academia. It challenges the traditional ivory tower mentality and fosters a more inclusive approach to knowledge production.

This approach offers a hopeful message for African scholars. Instead of dwelling on victimhood narratives, we can focus on fostering collaboration, recognising our interdependencies, and building a more equitable and inclusive academic landscape.

With that, I'll open the floor for further discussion. Thank you.

Snippets of the discussion after the APN and Next Generation Fellows lecture

Question:

Francis, thank you for your fascinating perspective, using metaphors from literature, social science, and African wisdom to spark conversation and challenge existing paradigms. You've invited us to embrace connections rather than disconnections, and raised important questions about African scholarship: Who is an African scholar? How should they approach their work? What is the "right" way to reflect and write about Africa?

As the proverb says, "Many routes lead to the market." You've introduced the concept of Ubuntu scholarship, highlighting the importance of being through others. The question then becomes, how do we put this into practice as African scholars in our respective universities and contexts? How can we embrace interconnectedness and foster collaboration in our everyday work?

The metaphor of the skull borrowing body parts is indeed powerful. But how does this relate to a PhD student or a postdoctoral scholar in Africa? How can they apply this concept to their writing and career aspirations?

Yes, the skull had integrity and returned the borrowed parts. But what about the princess? How did she feel after discovering the truth? And who, in our everyday lives in Africa, represents the skull and the princess?

These are all intriguing questions, and I've raised them to stimulate further discussion.

Answer:

Those are excellent points. Let's revisit the skull metaphor and imagine a university student in Bamenda in the Cameroon Grassfields. The University of Bamenda is relatively new, and this student is immersed in the local scholarly context, using local resources and knowledge. They feel no need to explore beyond Bamenda because their current understanding seems sufficient.

However, this young scholar receives a call for participation in a conference in New York or Bloemfontein, sent by a sibling living abroad. This invitation challenges their assumptions about what constitutes valuable knowledge and opens up a new world of possibilities.

This call for participation challenges our Bamenda scholar to engage with unfamiliar scholarship and perspectives. They wonder how to compete successfully at this international level. They seek resources in a limited local library, reaching out to colleagues who may have participated in similar networks. Even then, they lack all the necessary elements.

They've already borrowed from their community, relying on those who understand the value of collaboration. However, if these colleagues subscribe to a competitive, zero-sum mindset, they may be hesitant to help, fearing that the student's success could threaten their own. This mentality of lone-ranger-ism has hindered African scholarship for far too long.

These colleagues, trapped in the mindset of individual success, may withhold their resources and connections. They view knowledge as a limited commodity, believing that sharing it diminishes their own advantage. This competitive model has severely hampered African scholarship.

Convivial scholarship challenges this paradigm. It encourages generosity, sharing knowledge and networks freely. It recognises that scholarship thrives on collaboration and exchange, not isolation. Scholars are part of a community, engaging in ongoing conversations shaped by shared canons and ideas.

Our Bamenda student or colleague, seeking to participate in the New York or Bloemfontein conference, must navigate these challenges. They may see foreign or local conference and research funding or fellowships and grants as the ultimate prise, a validation of their individual achievement. But receiving the award is just the first step. They must then demonstrate their ability to engage with international scholarship, to participate in conversations and hold their own, not through arrogance or ambushing, but through humility and a willingness to exchange ideas.

Good scholarship is marked by curiosity, not by pretending to have all the answers. Isolation leads to stagnation, while engagement fosters growth and new discoveries.

In academia, as in life, no one is self-sufficient. We come to scholarship with questions, constantly seeking new angles to examine familiar topics. Chinua Achebe likened the world to a dancing masquerade, constantly in motion. Studying a dynamic continent like Africa requires us to move with it, exploring its ever-changing nimbleness, landscapes and perspectives.

This means examining the various social, cultural, and historical dimensions that shape African realities. We must consider class, ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, and intergenerational dynamics along with how they intersect with one another to understand this complex phenomenon fully.

The scholar who borrows body parts from diverse sources, rather than relying on a single, predictable model, embodies the necessary nuance, complexity and open-endedness of a "complete gentleman" in motion. This approach is essential for engaging with the diverse and ever-evolving nature of African scholarship.

The skull metaphor is meant to be flexible, allowing you to substitute characters and contexts as you see fit. The princess's gullibility reminds us to look beyond appearances and superficial charm, grounding our ambitions in reality.

In the digital age, the skull's quest for completeness and self-enhancement would undoubtedly take on a new dimension, with access to a wealth of information and technologies that could aid in the pursuit of perfection.

A digital-era skull would not be limited to word-of-mouth accounts about the princess and her exacting standards. It would leverage the power of social media and dating apps to research her preferences and tailor its "enhancements" accordingly. If the princess were interested in reconciling gender binaries, the skull might borrow body parts from both men and women, blurring the lines of traditional gender roles. If she were passionate about climate change, the skull might incorporate elements from the natural world, reflecting her values and concerns. And if she wanted a humanoid, cyborg or something "half ghostly and half earthly" like a creature from Amos Tutuola's "My Life in the Bush of Ghosts", why would not the skull borrow accordingly?

This adaptation to the digital age highlights the fluidity of identity and the ever-evolving quest for self-improvement. The skull's actions would be a testament to the power of technology to shape our perceptions of self and the lengths we go to in order to fit in or stand out. It also underscores the importance of context in shaping our choices and the need to adapt to the changing landscape of social norms and values or, in scholarship, canons, prescriptions and expectations.

In essence, the digital era skull's quest for completeness would be a reflection of our own desires and anxieties in a world saturated with information and technology. It would be a story about the challenges and opportunities that come with the pursuit of self-improvement and distinction in a constantly evolving digital landscape.

Question:

The ideal of the "complete gentleman" is contextual, and enhancements ("*juju*") are borrowed and returned after use. What does stepping back from this ideal mean for the scholar? What does it mean to borrow new enhancements and become new versions of oneself in relation to Africa, the world, others, and one's own identity? In essence, what does the necessary fluctuation between completeness and incompleteness mean for a scholar?

Answer:

Completeness or incompleteness, when stagnant, starves us of productive encounters that generate opportunity and fulfilment. Humans, nature, and technology must constantly evolve. A scholar is always in motion, intellectually and otherwise. What is borrowed need not be returned, but circulated to extend fulfilment. An *entente cordiale* is necessary for all and sundry to maximise the benefits of such circulation. Privatisation, monopolisation, or immobilisation are dangerous, removing meaning from human pursuits and creating a false hierarchy between completeness and incompleteness.

Question:

Thank you, Francis, for your engaging lecture. I'd like to play devil's advocate here. You've eloquently described the importance of accommodating and internalising others, which seems to be a widespread practice in Africa. However, isn't this strategy prone to abuse if the parties involved don't approach the encounter with the same level of conviviality? Can one-sided conviviality exist? And what if, in your smartphone metaphor, the act of charging leads to complete depletion?

Answer:

That's an excellent question, and one I've been anticipating. Convivial scholarship doesn't mean ignoring the existing power imbalances and inequalities within academia. It acknowledges the long history of violence and exclusion inherent in these structures.

The question is, how do we move beyond simply identifying these issues and instead create opportunities for those marginalised by these systems? How do we empower voices that have been silenced or disregarded?

I mentioned CODESRIA as an example of an organisation committed to challenging these hierarchies and fostering alternative knowledge production models. However, even CODESRIA faces limitations because it operates within the same system of zero-sum games and entrenched hierarchies. It's a painful reality, especially when the perpetrators of these inequalities are often members of the organisation itself.

I recall during my time at the CODESRIA secretariat in Dakar, we organised youth and gender institutes, issuing calls for participation similar to the hypothetical Bamenda scholar's foreign conference participation above. In CODESRIA's case, they diligently sent documentation to members, but these written materials often failed to represent the full breadth of their excellent scholarship. This suggests that even within African studies, African voices and perspectives can be overlooked or underrepresented.

It's a troubling realisation that one can easily ignore African scholarship and still be considered an expert in African studies. Even within the continent, scholars, like the Tutuola princess in her ambitions, may neglect the wealth of knowledge produced locally, focusing instead on external sources and perspectives.

I propose that we adopt convivial scholarship as a guiding principle, not apologetically, but as a challenge to the global academic community. This approach isn't exclusive to Africa; it's a call for everyone to engage in knowledge production differently.

We should challenge our colleagues at conferences and seminars, highlighting biases and skewed perspectives, as feminist scholars have done across various disciplines. Younger scholars are increasingly recognising the dominance of certain voices and demanding change.

Convivial scholarship encourages diverse perspectives, challenging established norms, and promoting curiosity and intellectual growth. It refuses to let any discipline or individual rest on their laurels, assuming completeness based on power, authority or privilege.

So, I invite the devil, and all devil's advocates, to join this conversation and contribute to our understanding of convivial scholarship. Critical engagement is essential for meaningful progress.

Question:

Thank you, Professor Nyamnjoh, for your insightful talk. I have two questions:

Some mentors encourage us to share our work, even in its incomplete form, to foster conversation and generosity. However, there seem to be two extremes when it comes to incompleteness. On one hand, oversharing can lead to being overwhelmed by others' ideas and losing our own voice. On the other extreme, isolation can lead to feelings of completeness or imposter syndrome. How do you navigate these extremes?

Often, ideas are viewed as competitive rather than complementary. We strive for the "best" ideas instead of collaborating and contributing different perspectives. How can we foster a convivial scholarship that emphasises collaboration and complementarity over competition?

You've raised a crucial point about balancing individual expression and collaboration. In the first half of Tutuola's story, the skull seeks to stand out by borrowing the "best" body parts, driven by a competitive desire. However, real-life encounters are often less deliberate, and the knowledge we gain from them isn't always immediately applicable. It's when faced with a challenge that we sift through our diverse experiences and find unexpected solutions.

Answer:

Convivial scholarship embraces this organic process, blurring the lines between academic and everyday knowledge, just as it blurs disciplinary boundaries. It doesn't negate specialisation but encourages us to draw inspiration from diverse sources and engage in cross-disciplinary conversations.

There's always a point of origin. In the written version of this keynote address, I argue that we've overused the term "international," assuming certain locations are inherently superior. But even a child born in Oxford or Cambridge starts their intellectual journey in a local context. They learn about the global significance of institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge universities later on.

Your question about generosity with scholarship highlights another problem. We're often trained to hoard our ideas, fearing that sharing them diminishes our value. We must not shy away from sharing, even when the danger is real of others not just borrowing, but even stealing ideas and presenting them as their own. This mindset reinforces a singular, fixed identity based on individual ownership of knowledge.

However, if we truly recognised the absence of a unified self, we would embrace the potential of our incompleteness. We find life and fulfilment through mobility and encounters that continuously shape and reshape us as composite beings.

We are all a patchwork of experiences, starting with our families. Even before birth, we're connected to the outside world through the umbilical cord. Life is a constant process of coming to terms with our incompleteness, not as a weakness, but as a fundamental aspect of existence.

By celebrating incompleteness and mobility, we can approach scholarship as a conversation, not a monologue. We don't need to overwhelm others with our knowledge but can instead engage in a mutual exchange of ideas, acknowledging our individual strengths and weaknesses.

Convivial scholarship encourages us to reject the notion of permanent completeness. It's pointless to hoard knowledge like a fully charged smartphone that never gets used. We are energised by the conversations and kindred fulfilment that an energised or charged smartphone brings our way. The purpose of knowledge is to be shared, to spark conversations, and to create new understanding.

Question:

Thank you, Professor Nyamnjoh. Your presentation on conviviality reminded me of your paper on the elephant and the blind men at the 2012 Anthropology Southern Africa conference. It beautifully illustrates how different perspectives shape our understanding, much like the blind men feeling various parts of the elephant.

In the context of convivial scholarship and writing, could you elaborate on how this metaphor applies? Specifically, how does it relate to knowledge production in Africa?

Additionally, I'm intrigued by your concept of resistance to colonial education. How does this resistance interact with the idea of convivial writing? What implications does it hold for young, emerging African scholars?

Answer:

Thank you for your question and for recalling my presentation on the elephant and the blind men. That metaphor indeed aligns with the concept of convivial scholarship, where diverse perspectives contribute to a richer understanding of complex subjects.

To juxtapose the two, the elephant metaphor illustrates the limitations of individual perspectives. Each blind man, touching a different part of the elephant, forms a partial understanding. Only by combining their experiences can they grasp the whole picture.

Similarly, convivial scholarship acknowledges that no single discipline or individual holds the complete truth. It encourages collaboration and the integration of diverse viewpoints to create a richer, more nuanced understanding of Africa.

Regarding your second point about resisting colonial education while embracing convivial writing, I believe these two concepts can coexist. Convivial scholarship challenges the dominance of Western knowledge systems while valuing and incorporating Indigenous African knowledge traditions. It's about recognising the plurality of knowledge and creating space for diverse voices and perspectives.

For young and emerging scholars, this approach is particularly empowering. It allows them to draw on their unique experiences and cultural backgrounds, challenging established norms and contributing to a more inclusive and representative body of African scholarship.

To dwell a little further on the elephant and the blind men, let me share another metaphor from Cameroon. In the forest regions, they say that cooking an elephant is no easy feat; it requires immense effort and patience. It's a task that cannot be rushed.

Similarly, understanding knowledge, like understanding an elephant, requires time and ongoing interaction. The blind men in the story realised that their individual perspectives were limited, but by sharing their experiences, they could collectively gain a more complete understanding.

This metaphor highlights the importance of patience and collaboration in knowledge production. We shouldn't rush to conclusions or assume that our individual perspectives are all-encompassing. Instead, we should engage in ongoing conversations and exchange ideas to deepen our understanding.

Knowledge acquisition is a continuous process. As you progress through your studies, you start with a narrow focus, which gradually expands as you delve deeper. This can be overwhelming, so it's crucial to reframe and narrow your focus to make a meaningful contribution to your field. This doesn't mean oversimplifying complex issues, but rather focusing on a specific area to contribute to the larger conversation.

The story of the blind men and the elephant illustrates that partial knowledge is inevitable, even within a specific discipline. We all have limited perspectives, and it's through sharing and collaboration that we can gain a more comprehensive understanding.

Even the elephant itself might struggle to fully comprehend its own complexity. It relies on experts, like veterinarians and medical practitioners, to analyse and explain its anatomy. This highlights the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in knowledge production. No single perspective is complete, and we all benefit from sharing our knowledge and expertise.

Being part of something doesn't equate to complete self-knowledge. The elephant, while inherently "elephant," may not fully grasp its own nature. Others, observing from different angles, might offer valuable insights. This relates to the dancing masquerade metaphor – studying a dynamic, ever-changing phenomenon like Africa requires examining it from multiple perspectives.

When conducting research, clearly define and situate your audience. Different disciplines approach phenomena differently; a geographer's perspective will differ from a sociologist's or a political scientist's. We often define a phenomenon first, then explore it through our disciplinary lens.

We must avoid hasty claims to knowledge and acknowledge the validity of diverse perspectives. As Chinua Achebe wisely noted, each generation must forge its own artistic path, building upon or challenging the achievements of its predecessors. This principle extends to scholarship as well. Our understanding of Africa has evolved since CODESRIA's founding in 1973. Africans have traversed borders, bringing varied experiences and perspectives, with diasporic Africans and their children playing prominent roles in CODESRIA, navigating complex identity landscapes.

To remain relevant, we must keep pace with this evolving reality. Conviviality, as I define it, acknowledges incompleteness and embraces mobility and encounters. This differs from other interpretations of conviviality, which assume completeness.

My understanding of conviviality is rooted in the recognition of our composite nature. When we embrace our incompleteness and engage with others, we create opportunities for growth, collaboration, and new knowledge production.

The skull, living with borrowed body parts, had to choreograph them to function as a unified whole, not a disjointed mess. Similarly, convivial scholarship involves harmonising the diverse knowledge and experiences we acquire through encounters and mobility. It's about integrating these disparate elements into a coherent and effective approach to our work.

Imagine an African scholar whose journey begins in a village or city, then moves through Afropolitan and cosmopolitan spaces, eventually landing at a prestigious university like Stanford, Harvard, Penn State, Columbia or Toronto. Each of these experiences contributes to their unique perspective, creating a scholar who defies easy categorisation.

Convivial scholarship encourages us to embrace this complexity. We don't have to shed our diverse experiences and perspectives to conform to a single narrative. Instead, we can bring our full selves to our scholarship, acknowledging the richness and nuance that arises from our journeys.

In today's digital age, our capacity to access and store vast amounts of knowledge is akin to carrying a terabyte hard drive. This wealth of information allows us to draw from diverse sources and perspectives, enriching our understanding and fostering a more inclusive and dynamic approach to knowledge production. We should emulate ChatGPT's effortless navigation of information networks, even as we maintain a critical eye towards its limitations.

Question:

Conviviality and Networking: How can we apply the philosophy of conviviality to networking and building collaborations among African scholars, both within the continent and in the diaspora? How can we create networks that facilitate the exchange of knowledge, resources, and opportunities?

Publishing in Africa: There's a common perception that international publishers hold a monopoly on academic publishing and often disadvantage African scholars and perspectives. Given your experience in publishing in Africa, can you share your insights on how to access reputable, internationally competitive Africa-based publishing outlets?

Answer:

Regarding publishing on the continent, CODESRIA stands as a shining example. They've achieved remarkable milestones, unmatched by any other publisher in Africa. Others have followed suit, making significant strides in their own right. I've personally served on the boards of HSRC Press and Langaa, working alongside the African Books Collective, which CODESRIA co-founded.

Together, we've made African scholarship accessible and competitive, even in spaces where it was once dismissed or overlooked. Students can no longer claim that African scholarship is absent from libraries or irrelevant to their studies.

African scholarship is readily available if you know where to look. Various scholarly networks on the continent and in the diaspora can play a crucial role in promoting this scholarship by sharing resources, connecting scholars, and highlighting relevant research. This includes sharing electronic books, journal articles, and contact information for experts in various fields. And, given the growing popularity of social media, we could harness platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook and X to share snippets about publications in addition to what Academia Edu and ResearchGate make available. I once read a full insightful review of my book, *Drinking from the Cosmic Gourd: How Amos Tutuola Can Change Our Minds*, which was ventilated entirely on X by Professor Grace Musila.

The networks we create and sustain with our scholarly generosity can be used effectively to enhance scholarship and foster collaboration, without relying solely on external sources or perpetuating the notion of African scholars as perpetual pupils.

I'm glad you find the concept of convivial scholarship productive. It's a vast topic with many avenues for exploration.

If decolonisation truly values Indigenous African languages and their diverse speakers, the publishing industry still has a long way to go. Despite progress, Indigenous language works continue to face systemic barriers, including geographic biases and the dominance of prestige languages. Henry Chakava, a prominent figure in East African publishing, identified these challenges as early as 1977, noting linguistic variations, lack of standardised orthography, and the limited pool of authors, editors, and readers for specific languages.

Chakava's passing in 2024 raises the question: has the landscape of African language publishing significantly changed since his observations? Despite a surge in decolonial scholarship, the reality often falls short of the rhetoric. Even with standardised orthography and technical advancements, Indigenous language publishing has not flourished. South Africa's Lovedale Press, established in 1823, serves as a prime example of this enduring struggle. The gap between theory and practice remains a critical issue in decolonising African literature and scholarship.

Lovedale was a pioneer in publishing African literature, particularly in isiXhosa. It provided a platform for Black authors and trained Black South Africans in printing and bookbinding. Despite its historical significance, marked by a plaque with a quote from renowned Xhosa author AC Jordan –"The earliest record of anything written by any Bantu-speaking African in his own language in South Africa was made at the small printing press at Old Lovedale." –, Lovedale faced bankruptcy and ceased publishing in 2015.

Efforts are now underway to revive Lovedale Press, led by the Thabo Mbeki Foundation in collaboration with several universities. I would suggest these consultations be done in conversation with AI. This potential revival could revitalise Lovedale's legacy in education, religion, culture, and literature, as seen through the contributions of Black South African authors, printers, and bookbinders. Decolonisation of scholarship on the continent should provide for developing and sustaining scholarly publishing on the continent, with scholars who clamour for decolonisation taking leadership in supporting publishers on the continent.

Question:

What is the difference between convivial scholarship and decoloniality?

Answer:

To answer your question, let me address the distinction between conviviality and decoloniality. While both approaches aim to challenge power imbalances and create more inclusive knowledge systems, they differ in their emphasis and strategies.

Decoloniality primarily focuses on dismantling colonial structures and legacies, particularly in knowledge production. It critiques the dominance of Western epistemologies and advocates for centring marginalised voices and perspectives.

Conviviality, on the other hand, emphasises collaboration, exchange, and the recognition of interconnectedness. It seeks to create a more equitable and inclusive academic environment by fostering dialogue and mutual respect among diverse scholars and knowledge systems.

While decoloniality is essential for dismantling oppressive structures, conviviality offers a way to move beyond critique and towards building new, more inclusive forms of knowledge production. It avoids the pitfalls of appropriation by emphasising collaboration and mutual respect, rather than simply replacing one dominant narrative with another.

I believe convivial scholarship can complement decolonial efforts by fostering dialogue and collaboration between scholars from diverse backgrounds, creating a space where multiple perspectives can coexist and enrich each other.

Decoloniality, when pursued within a framework of zero-sum victories, seeks to undo colonial violence and violations through complete rupture and unravelling. It's a radical approach, akin to the skull's complete deactivation or complete activation in Tutuola's story.

It is true that humans are wired for a sense of completeness, even if fleeting. We often cling to notions of ownership and control, which can hinder true decolonisation. This is where convivial scholarship offers an alternative. It acknowledges the interconnectedness of knowledge and encourages collaboration and exchange rather than complete separation.

While decoloniality aims to reclaim and restore what was lost, convivial scholarship focuses on building new, more inclusive knowledge systems. It recognises that knowledge is not a fixed entity but a dynamic process shaped by diverse perspectives and experiences.

Indeed, complete decolonisation might require a radical rupture, like the skull's unravelling. But it's a complex process. Can we truly undo the colonial education that shaped us, even after achieving a PhD in coloniality? Perhaps decolonisation is about acknowledging and embracing our inherent incompleteness, mobility, encounters, and composite nature. It's about recognising our debts and engaging in convivial knowledge production. This notion is in itself subversive in relation to many traditional or conventional dominant narratives from the Global North.

This approach offers a nuanced understanding of decolonisation, moving beyond simple reversals of power, authority and privilege. Incompleteness becomes a framework for continuous growth and collaboration, rather than a static state of achieved liberation.

Consider the landmark publication *Engendering African Social Sciences* (1997), which emerged after CODESRIA's significant contributions. It highlighted the dominance of male voices and perspectives in African scholarship, even within a decolonial framework. This demonstrates that even successful decolonial efforts can be incomplete, requiring further critique and engagement. This is an example of the necessity of having an intersectional perspective. Otherwise, doubly and triply marginalised perspectives, narratives and representations risk being re-marginalised even within progressive movements.

Just as a perspective is never complete, so too is the work of decolonising knowledge. CODESRIA's success in establishing an African perspective was significant, but it's an ongoing process. The initial focus on gender has expanded to include youth, children, language, sexuality and more. This demonstrates the evolving nature of knowledge production and the need for continuous reassessment and inclusion.

If we cling to the notion of completeness, we become defensive when faced with critiques or calls for change. Instead, we should embrace the idea that knowledge is a perpetual work in progress. By acknowledging our limitations – including missteps and errors, accepting these and using them as learning opportunities rather than seeing them as something shameful or anathema – and welcoming new perspectives, we can foster a more dynamic and inclusive academic landscape.

This applies to individual scholars as well. We should strive to be perpetual questioners, constantly seeking new knowledge and challenging our own assumptions.

Question:

What tips to you have for overcoming challenges in writing?

Answer:

To answer your question about overcoming challenges in writing, I've certainly faced moments of doubt and frustration in my own journey. What motivates me during those times is a deep-seated belief in the importance of my work. I remind myself of the potential impact my research can have on people's lives and the broader understanding of African realities.

For colleagues facing similar challenges, I offer this advice:

Remember your purpose: Why did you start writing in the first place? What are you passionate about? Reconnect with your purpose and the potential impact of your work.

Embrace the process: Writing is a journey, not a destination. There will be setbacks and challenges along the way. Focus on the process of learning and discovery, rather than the end product.

Seek support: Don't isolate yourself. Reach out to colleagues, mentors, or writing groups for guidance and encouragement. Share your work with trusted peers and welcome their feedback.

Take breaks: Step away from your work when you feel stuck. Engage in activities that inspire you and recharge your creative energy.

Celebrate small victories: Acknowledge your progress and celebrate small milestones along the way. This will help you stay motivated and build confidence in your abilities.

Overcoming challenges in writing often requires unconventional approaches and finding inspiration from unexpected sources. Sometimes, seeking feedback from peers or even those unfamiliar with your topic can offer fresh perspectives.

Inspiration can come from anywhere – music, nature, conversations, sleep. Personally, when I need to write about Africa, I listen to Fela Kuti's music at high volume. It puts me in a daring mood, ready to tackle any obstacle.

I encourage you to explore different techniques and find what works best for you. However, it's crucial to share your work with trusted individuals. Not everyone will offer constructive feedback or have your best interests at heart.

It's important to be discerning about who you share your work with. As I have already admitted above, there's a risk of having your ideas prematurely appropriated or misrepresented, especially in the age of social media. It's crucial to trust your instincts and share your work with those who will offer constructive feedback and support.

There's no single formula for overcoming writer's block or maintaining motivation. Different approaches work for different people. Sometimes, seeking inspiration from peers or engaging in unrelated activities can help. I find that working on multiple projects simultaneously can be beneficial. If I get stuck on one piece, I can switch to another, and sometimes, the act of switching can spark new ideas.

Teaching can also be a source of inspiration. Lightbulb moments often occur during classroom discussions, leading to new insights and research directions.

Ultimately, it's about finding what works for you and trusting the process. Remember, writing is a journey, not a destination. Embrace the challenges and celebrate the small victories along the way.

Question:

How do we keep researching in contexts of dwindling research funding?

Answer:

We need to explore alternative funding sources. We could encourage our billionaires, like Dangote and Motsepe, to invest in research, perhaps by endowing positions at CODESRIA or universities. We already offer them honorary degrees for a fee; perhaps we can leverage that to secure research funding.

We could also approach our footballers, suggesting they invest their wealth in research instead of luxury cars. There's a wealth of potential for exciting research on football in Africa, as I saw during my visit to Amsterdam, where scholars were actively studying the sport. We could replicate those efforts here in our universities.

Yes, funding often comes with strings attached. But many researchers have learned to navigate these constraints, going beyond the narrow terms set by donors to explore broader theoretical possibilities. It's about finding ways to satisfy both the funder's requirements and our own intellectual pursuits. We can "shoot two birds with one stone," even when dealing with those who seek to control rather than enable.

Conclusion

In closing, our vibrant dialogue today has illuminated the transformative power of convivial scholarship. The metaphors and symbols we've explored – the skull's strategic borrowing, the smartphone's charge and discharge, the elephant's multifaceted nature – weave a rich tapestry for future scholarly conversations about the dynamic landscape of African knowledge production.

As you continue your academic journeys, I urge you to embrace the essence of convivial scholarship. Let collaboration, interconnectedness, and the celebration of diverse perspectives guide your research and writing. Remember that knowledge is not a solitary pursuit but a collective endeavour, fuelled by the continuous exchange of ideas and experiences.

As you embark on this journey, consider these guiding questions:

> *Contextualising Convivial Scholarship*: How can you tailor the principles of convivial scholarship to your specific academic environment? What unique opportunities and challenges does your context present for fostering collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and the integration of diverse knowledge sources?
>
> *Navigating Challenges*: The pursuit of convivial scholarship, while transformative, is not without its hurdles. The allure of 'completeness', deeply ingrained in traditional academic structures, can create resistance to the embrace of incompleteness and collaboration. Power dynamics and entrenched hierarchies may pose challenges to fostering a truly inclusive and equitable environment for knowledge production. What challenges and limitations might you encounter in implementing this approach? How can you proactively address these challenges and ensure the success of your collaborative endeavours?
>
> *Balancing Collaboration and Individuality*: The pursuit of knowledge often involves a delicate balance between collaboration and individual recognition. How can you navigate this tension within the framework of convivial scholarship? How can you ensure that your contributions are acknowledged and valued while fostering a spirit of shared ownership and collective achievement?

By actively engaging with these questions and incorporating convivial scholarship into your practices, you have the power to shape a more inclusive, dynamic, and impactful scholarly landscape in Africa. The journey towards decolonised knowledge production is ongoing, requiring our collective commitment. It begins with each of us embracing our incompleteness and recognising the transformative potential of collaboration and mobility.

Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye's thoughtful response, in an email to me on September 20, 2024 (here included with her permission), to this keynote beautifully captures the essence of convivial scholarship and its potential to inspire and guide us on this journey:

Dear Francis,

Thank you for sharing your insightful talk on convivial scholarship. Your emphasis on embracing incompleteness and fostering collaboration resonates deeply with my current academic context.

Your exploration of the skull's strategic borrowing of body parts highlights the importance of intentional relationship-building in scholarly pursuits. It prompts us to consider not only how we collaborate but also with whom we choose to engage. Your thoughtful responses to questions about the challenges and complexities of embodying conviviality offer valuable guidance as we navigate the inevitable trials and errors on this path.

Your redefinition of indebtedness, shifting it away from its capitalist connotations, is particularly illuminating. It underscores the generative potential of acknowledging our interconnectedness and recognising that scholarly ideas are shaped by a multitude of influences. Your talk encourages a more transparent and honest approach to knowledge production, acknowledging the contributions of others and fostering a culture of care within academia.

Your work is particularly relevant to my current position at a Scottish university housed in a building with historical ties to Caribbean enslavement. Your insights on conviviality and incompleteness have prompted me to reflect on the necessary humility, transparency, and care required to honour the complex histories and debts associated with this space. I am inspired to continue grappling with these ideas and their implications for my scholarship and engagement within this context.

Thank you again for your generosity in sharing your work and for your kind words about mine. I look forward to staying connected and continuing this enriching conversation.

Warm regards,

Victoria

Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye's words remind us that convivial scholarship is not merely an abstract concept, but a powerful tool for addressing the complexities and injustices of our world. By embracing collaboration, acknowledging our interconnectedness, and fostering a culture of care, we can create a more just and equitable academic landscape that honours the diverse histories and perspectives that shape our knowledge production.

Let us all be inspired by Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye's reflections and commit to fostering a scholarly environment where diverse voices are heard, knowledge is shared generously, and collaboration is celebrated. The future of African scholarship is bright, and together, we can create a more inclusive, dynamic, and impactful landscape for generations to come.