

Dani Nabudere's Afrikology: An Interview with Sanya Osha

Sanya Osha is a philosopher, poet, novelist and author of several books, including *Kwasi Wiredu and Beyond: The Text, Writing and Thought in Africa* (2005), *Postethnophilosophy* (2011) and *African Postcolonial Moder-nity: Informal Subjectivities and the Democratic Consensus* (2014). He is also the author of the critically acclaimed novel, *Naked Light and the Blind Eye*. His fictional work, *Dust, Spittle and Wind* won the Association of Nigerian Authors' prize for prose in 1992. In 2000, he was a recipient of Prince Claus Award. He lives in South Africa and has worked at the Universities of Ibadan, Nigeria, KwaZulu-Natal and UNISA; he is a fellow of the African Studies Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands.

Itibari M. Zulu (IMZ): Thank you for this interview concerning your book titled *Dani Nabudere's Afrikology: A Quest for African Holism* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2018).

Sanya Osha (SO): Many thanks for granting me this wonderful opportunity.

IMZ: In your preface, I read that you juxtapose the corpus of Dani Nabudere and those of Cheikh Anta Diop, Molefi Kete Asante and Wim M. J. van Binsbergen as they intersect with many of Nabudere's preoccupations. I had not learned of Wim van Binsbergen, an anthropologist working on the theory and method of research on cultural globalisation in connection with virtuality, Information and Communication Technology, ethnicity and religion, with a project on 'Africa's Contribution to Global Systems of Knowledge: An Epistemology for African Studies in the Twenty-First Century' that links his research at the African Studies Centre, Leiden in the Netherlands. As I read, I don't see much discussion of him, but I see him well placed in your references. Is he

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someone we should be following, and in short, what has been his best contribution to the discussion on intersection with the work of Nabudere?

SO: Wim van J. Binsbergen is truly a phenomenon in that he is not fully understood or appreciated in the academic world. He trained initially as an anthropologist, speaks five different African languages and has conducted extensive ethnographical research in virtually all the regions of the continent, namely, Southern, Northern, Western and Central Africa. He began his fieldwork in the late 1960s and his first daughter bears a North African name. Another interesting part of his intellectual practice is that he is, unlike most other Western anthropologists, uncomfortable with the positionality of anthropologist as the sole participant or even arbiter of the knowledge-making process. So,

there is a constant interrogation/problematisation of the subject/object or the knowledgeable observer and passive/inactive observed dichotomy. These problematisations and self-critiques are integral to his knowledge-making practice, sometimes at the cost of agonising private disclosure.

He is also a *sangoma* and he became one after his training in Botswana in the 1980s. Now, how many highly trained Western or European anthropologists are also *sangomas*? Very few, if any at all. Toward the end of his academic career (he retired from university service in 2012), he delved with his customary single-minded concentration into the study of comparative linguistics, the history of religions, classical studies and a host of other ancient and contemporary academic specialties in order to plot a broad trajectory of global intellectual history, and most amazingly, he arguably has succeeded in this objective. In today's parochial academic environment, such a maddeningly broad intellectual adventure would be vehemently discouraged, and he was able to accomplish his central aims with very little institutional support.

Finally, the part of his multifarious projects that borders on Nabudere's work is the specialty of protohistory. Nabudere is concerned with the intellectual accomplishments of ancient Nubia, ancient Ethiopia and ancient Egypt; and so, I wanted to offer different but related vistas to the topics Nabudere is concerned with.

IMZ: Also, in your preface you mention that Nabudere made contributions to the broad field of African scholarship and his stature in African scholarship; towards the final segment of his career, he was solely preoccupied with Afrikology, which marks a major advance in his development as a conceptual thinker. What do you think happened and what do you think we can learn from that scenario?

SO: I cannot proffer a precise answer but can only speculate in view of the tenor of Nabudere's strident critiques of Western imperialism. Nabudere had condemned Western interference in the Great Lakes Region (GLR), the socio-political turmoil and mayhem caused by the Western powers and shady Western actors in the mineral rich regions of Africa, particularly in the GLR. He had argued that plans were afoot to re-colonise Africa and there were evident strategies of what may be termed 're-colonisation' in which Africa as a whole was being vilified in order to justify her plunder and (re)dismemberment as had occurred after the Berlin Conference of 1884.

Afrikology could be seen as an intellectual as well as a psychological shield against the onslaughts of 're-colonisation' and justifications for (re)dismemberment of the African continent at the practical level but of course the concept can be, and is being, deployed for other objectives as well.

IMZ: It is interesting that you write that Nabudere's work prior to his elucidation of the concept of Afrikology can be characterised by an absence of theory or, at best, half-hearted forays in search of a theory. But you write that with the conceptualisation of Afrikology, he came into his own; a voice discovered or, more appropriately, rekindled in the scalding ashes of postcolonial critique and the reoccurring realities of postcolonial malaise. That is an interesting assessment, and perhaps an evolutionary process of intellectual de-colonisation. Do you think that may be the case or perhaps it was something else; or if it was the case, do you think it is a general phenomenon in African intellectual discourse?

SO: As I have mentioned, it is easy to detect Nabudere's anger at the shameless plunder of the GLR by shady Western cabals and unscrupulous speculators who have absolute disregard for the peoples and future of the region. This cast of deplorable characters is motivated by pure avarice and an absolute disregard for the interests of the peoples concerned. It is not too difficult to read racism as being part of the reason behind such enormous contempt. And as I have pointed out, Afrikology provides the appropriate resources to counter all forms of racial and socio-economic injustice and abuse. It also advocates for the invaluable virtues of self-sufficiency in virtually all spheres of life – be they agriculture, political organisation, culture or history.

IMZ: Continuing, you mention that it seems impossible for Afrocentricity to compose itself without its mirror – Eurocentrism – because it requires its conceptual twin to breathe, and without which it would appear difficult to sustain an independent existence of its

own. Such an argument is not supported by Asante; he writes that Afrocentricity, unlike Eurocentrism has never worked to gain hegemony, hierarchy power or dominion, so there is a flaw in the argument. What is your take on this dichotomy?

SO: True, I argue in support of Asante that Afrocentricity doesn't work to gain hegemony but that it had to emerge out of the constant violence wreaked by Eurocentricism. Blacks (I hope this is an appropriate term for contemporary times) are usually unapologetically black when talking to other blacks (unless one is to conclude that unprecedented levels of self-hate and self-denial have surfaced, but at least in my corner of the world, we fully embrace our blackness). And so, when speaking exclusively to one another, blacks do not need to proclaim their Afrocentricity except when there is an explicit or implicit threat posed by Eurocentricism or other racialised attitudes or challenges. In a similar manner, following Wole Soyinka, the tiger does not need to proclaim its tigritude, it merely pounces.

IMZ: As I weave through your biography of Nabudere, you write that he demonstrates his unambiguous anti-imperialist stance to argue that globalisation is just another guise for colonial exploitation. I think such an observation or conclusion is part of a consciousness raising education in politics, especially for the African intellectual, a process shared by Kwame Nkrumah, the first Prime Minister and first President of Ghana, Cheikh Anta Diop, and poet, politician, cultural theorist (and the first President of Senegal), Léopold Sédar Senghor.

Do you agree, or are there some other elements involved, for example, in Nabudere's case?

SO: I am glad you make this particular observation which, for the most part, rings true. I am sure that in time, Nabudere would be viewed as being in that illustrious company of African liberators and thinkers who fought tirelessly for the emancipation of the peoples of African descent the world over.

IMZ: After much discussion on war and politics in Africa via Nabudere, it was refreshing to turn to his adoption of the concept of Afrikology when you quote him saying that ‘Afrikology seeks to retrace the evolution of knowledge and wisdom from its source to the current epistemologies, and to try and situate them in their historical and cultural contexts, especially with a view to establishing a new science for generating and accessing knowledge for sustainable use’, and from the problematic to you mentioning Afrikology being meant to provide a therapeutic function in healing chronic societal dysfunction and fragmentation. Do you believe Afrikology can currently provide a therapeutic function in healing chronic societal dysfunction and fragmentation, as articulated by Nabudere, or is there something else that may ‘turn the tide’?

SO: I think the ‘therapeutic function’ of Afrikology is self-evident. Asante writes about the lost-ness and loss-ness experienced by peoples of African descent all over the world. Black people in the diaspora who are drawn to vibrant black African cultures and traditions invariably speak of this lost-ness, the feelings of being violently yanked off one’s traditions by slavery and colonisation. Afrikology can definitely re-establish a more wholesome sense of self, a more balanced reading of history and therefore a more robust and versatile set of psychological resources to work with. Afrikology

is about reclaiming what was lost in our heritage as black people. Surely, this is therapeutic in view of the recurrent agonies of lost-ness.

IMZ: In working to understand the contributions of Nabudere, I learned that he agreed with Diop that the fragmentation of knowledge forms can only be reversed if the momentum and dominance of Platonian-Cartesian epistemology cease. In your research, did you discover if they had an actual meeting to discuss this topic, or others?

SO: I am not aware of any such meeting but they were definitely working within the same epistemological and ideological framework, and so could be considered as intellectual soul-mates. Nabudere also makes extensive use of Cheikh Anta Diop in pursuing his own work. How could he not have? Diop is truly a giant of African intellectual liberation, he was also a more rigorous scholar than Nabudere was.

IMZ: First, the science of the origin and development of the universe is not abstract to Africa (cosmologies), and second, the study or a theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge, especially with reference to its limits and validity (epistemologies). And interestingly, as you write, ‘one of Nabudere’s central arguments is that African cosmologies and epistemologies can be harnessed within the context of post-modernity for a new cultural synthesis as a panacea for the current existential malaise that afflicts the contemporary period’, and he further states that if recourse to the cultural accomplishments of ancient Greece has been possible, the same should be true about ancient inner Africa. Were you surprised to read this, or was it expected in reference to Nabudere’s overall evolution; and if you were surprised, why?

SO: I was not surprised. Rather, I was more impressed by the boldness of this stance. I was gratified by the thought that another world, an entirely new epistemological paradigm, was indeed possible. Nabudere’s total belief in the value and project of Afrikology was almost akin to religious faith and he constantly sought the intellectual support and affirmation of like-minded Afrocentricists.

IMZ: Additionally, as you write, Nabudere urges a return to an ethos of Nubian interconnectedness, aware that this project of cultural retrieval would be an arduous task, and thus, ‘a return to the ancient Egyptian or “inner Africa” system of ancient times is not possible in its pure form’. Such logic seems to border on concerns with abstract thought or subjects such as existence, causality, or truth, hence, the metaphysical. However, as you stated, not all Nabudere’s proposals about the return to an ethos of wholeness and interconnectedness are convincing, because he suggests that the employment of African languages is a possible way of attaining that goal, but has very little to say about the logistic requirements involved in such a project. The return to an African ethos of wholeness and interconnectedness is indeed an ideal, but how was his assessment received overall, among his peers?

SO: How is Nabudere received? It is difficult to say. Outside his home country of Uganda, he is well-respected but within Uganda, that is another matter entirely. Upon the publication of the book, I wrote to a couple of Ugandan intellectuals but I received no response. So, I don’t get the feeling that he is as revered in his country as in the manner that Soyinka or Chinua Achebe are revered in Nigeria. It is often said that colonialism

severely affected the intellectual traditions of Uganda in which scholars and writers were once compelled to package and present indigenous Ugandan traditions in a manner that colonial censors would find readily digestible, which of course would amount to a form of mutilation, silencing and erasure really. In other words, that couldn't have been a healthy situation. However, there were thought-provoking writers such as Okot p'Bitek emerging from Uganda who were prepared to confront the silences and repressions of colonial historiography. As for Nabudere, he may have been too radical for your average ivory tower-based scholar.

IMZ: Interestingly, and good in the context of Nabudere's experience, he (as you wrote), reaffirms the 'invaluable contributions of scholars such as Cheikh Anta Diop and Théophile Obenga, whose problematisations and interrogations of origins of African thought systems have demonstrated that there is much depth to be discovered in those traditions', a profound scholarly understanding that I think many don't capitalise on, and thus, a domain for the astute scholar. Perhaps scholars in Afrikology are making those links today, but I suspect they are quietly done within the conservative hall of the academy. Are you aware of such Nabudere, Diop and Obenga linkages today that advance Afrikology?

SO: There are currently powerful sites of Afrikology all over the world but academic institutions, both in the West and in Africa, are largely Eurocentric in outlook. Evidently, people of colour have to build their own institutions, networks and platforms to advance Afrikological agendas, orientations and initiatives. There are opportunities to spread the gospel of Afrikology and we must

continue to explore and disseminate those opportunities.

IMZ: I also read that Nabudere 'suggests attempts should be made to connect that illustrious past with the African present', a point you said 'makes his project worthy of careful attention' because it is 'essentially what his philosophy of Afrikology is about, the tracing of the historical, cultural, scientific, and social links between the Cradle of Humankind and the contemporary world, with a view to healing the seismic severances occasioned by violence, false thinking, war, loss, and dispossession to accomplish an epistemological and psychic sense of wholeness for Africa's collective self'. Hence, you wrote that 'of course, this proposition has considerable importance as a philosophy of universalism and not just as an African project', and thus, 'Afrikology intends to transcend the dichotomies inherited from Western epistemology (and culture as whole) that maintain a divide between mind and body or heart and mind and revert instead to an earlier conceptual tradition perfected in ancient Egypt that conceives of knowledge generation as a holistic enterprise, where the fundamental binary of the Western universe does not really apply'. I agree with your assessment and think the transcending of dichotomies inherited from Western epistemology is necessary for African liberation everywhere. Yet, many have held on until human consciousness and conditions give way to actions like the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall protest movement in South Africa, originally directed against a statue at the University of Cape Town commemorating Cecil Rhodes that received global attention, which sparked a wider movement to decolonise education across South Africa. Do you

think Afrikology (as defined by Nabudere or others) can transcend consciousness in perhaps similar ways? If so, why, and if not, why not?

SO: Definitely for the captive, colonised African consciousness, Afrikology provides a balm, an entirely new approach to history, culture, memory and existential orientation – in the age of fake news and fake history – that is empowering and self-liberating, that furnishes all that is dignifying and therapeutic in matters relating to Africanity. Ngugi wa Thiong'o had described (de)colonisation as one vast epistemological project. It definitely has multiple ramifications and dimensions. For me, Afrikology is a significant advancement on the idea of Pan-Africanism because it provides us with multi-pronged conceptual tools that confront the injuries of trauma, elemental loss, the disorientation and superficialities of the present and the deep-seated scepticism or even nihilism embedded in contemporary human consciousness. Afrikology possesses a depth and a capacity to generate reflection, optimism and positive action in what some have described as a post-human world.

It's good that you mention the Rhodes Must Fall protests that occurred in the University of Cape Town. Francis B. Nyamnjoh has written an interesting book on the affair which tells us how fractious and traumatising decolonisation processes continue to be. While Eurocentric circles might choose to view Cecil John Rhodes as a great empire builder, colonised peoples caught in the sometimes polarising throes of decolonisation are livid with anger caused by feelings of socio-economic dispossession and the ever-present sense of psychological loss.

IMZ: In reading the book, I see that Nabudere was making connections between theory and applied situations, and thus ‘attempts to establish a connection between restorative justice and Afrikology’ via a transdisciplinary methodological approach that ‘rejects the traditional divisions between academic disciplines while advocating a more holistic strategy toward knowledge production’; as he posits that ‘knowledge itself emanates from the heart, which processes the sensations and experiences derived from the five senses’; and ‘the word is the vehicle through which knowledge is transmitted and human communities function on the basis of the correlation between themselves’. Here the brilliance of Nabudere comes to light to illuminate, as you wrote, ‘that justice can only make sense if it stems from the lived experiences of the people(s) concerned and if it acts as a glue between disparate cultures [and] in this way, the greatest possible understanding can be derived’. And furthermore, ‘justice, as such, should not be conceived and implemented as a rigid set of societal injunctions to punish infringements upon the law in a manner that is removed from the pulse, aspirations, and failings of society’ wherein ‘restoration and reparations, it is argued, are also vital to a holistic understanding of justice’. I am impressed, when discovering this content, how did it move you?

SO: I think it is a considerable advancement in Afrikological thought. Here, Nabudere is demonstrating how Afrikology is necessary for contemporary African existence, and also that it is an approach with which to deal with the complexities and shortcomings of (post)modernity. We are offered a critical lens through which to

critique modernity as active agents rather than as uncritical consumers.

IMZ: You also wrote that ‘Nabudere goes a step further to advocate a transdisciplinary approach encompassing as many multidisciplinary perspectives as possible’, and thus, ‘society can become more manageable and equitable if the monopoly of power and violence enjoyed by the state is relinquished’, with him also arguing ‘that the contemporary democratic state is no different from feudal regimes in the manner in which it controls and determines the nature of violence’. The thinking and reasoning of Nabudere seem to be ‘on point’, and today, we may be pressed to find a peer. But who would you suggest, given the time of his passing, and today?

SO: Obviously, one would have to mention Molefi Kete Asante, Toyin Falola, Maulana Karenga, Wade Nobles and some other Africanist activists/scholars outside the academy working in areas of aesthetics, healing and divination. The latter category of workers (such as Luisah Teish) may not always get the attention of the academy but they are vital in spreading the word in everyday communities all over the African diaspora. Increasingly, in the age of internet, more and more believers in Afrikology, Afrocentricity and other African-centred movements are becoming visible. What it means is that most forms of Western media and vast colonialist-minded sectors of the media in the Africana world have ignored Afrikological movements for reasons best known to them, and this is a great pity. We are now seeing an almost inexhaustible plethora of Africana forms of cultural expression, cosmologies that are rich, life-affirming and that are in fact often richer than similar cultural forms outside the Africana world.

IMZ: Nabudere, as you write, says that: 1) ‘a transdisciplinary consciousness is required to return human society to a considerably more wholesome state, and for this transdisciplinary approach to knowledge production to be useful, humankind must find much deeper ways in which to reconnect with the ancient sense’; 2) transdisciplinarity is the most appropriate way to transcend the chronic limitations of monodisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and interdisciplinarity, a reality filtered through a multidimensional lens as opposed to being fractured as if through a prism, while African cosmologies reflect on the uni-dimensionality of reality (hence, Nabudere identifies a convergence between the ideas of Nicolescu and Diop attesting to the multi-referentiality of existence); 3) a primal link connects humankind, vegetation, the animal world, and the galaxy, which Cartesian rationality and scientific knowledge have ruptured; therefore, he urges for a ‘reconvergence’ that would restore a ‘oneness’ to the procedures of knowledge making. This melody of human connections rooted in the consciousness of Afrikology, a philosophy by which Nabudere says ‘humankind can overcome the multiple problems of contemporary society’, represents a metatheory, hence, a theory devised to analyse a theory. Do you see this as significant? If so, why, and if not, why not?

SO: Nabudere is unveiling the more intellectually challenging and rigorous aspects of Afrikology. Just as Diop and later Asante had done, Afrikology has got to be developed on unassailable intellectual foundations even when there is an undeniable activist element in its ‘strategies of conversion’ to employ a somewhat awkward term. I often think Pan-Africanism, a terribly important idea, offers

only feel-good sentiments without always employing the appropriate intellectual armour in relation to the full realisation of its political potentials which have always been immense. Afrikology, for me, goes much further, and in spite of the challenges, has immense possibilities for intellectual rigour and analysis.

IMZ: Your presentation on Nabudere based on the above, and more of what you record, cause one to ask: how and why did he originally conceptualise his Afrikology? Hence so many things readers wish to learn when Nabudere argues that: 1) knowledge is characterised by epistemological dualisms and hierarchies that splinter and dichotomise in a broadest sense, while transdisciplinarity is mediated by hermeneutics to provide a panacea; 2) there is a need for the adoption of a holistic approach to knowledge making that would entail a keen consideration for language, mores, customs, and other related repertoires found in a particular culture; 3) a critique of dominant science allows for the inclusion of Afrikology as an alternative epistemology, ‘an epistemology of knowledge generation and application that has roots in discarded forms of knowledge that unquestionably define the meaning of “human”’; 4) philosopher and professor Valentin-Yves Mudimbe and professor Kwame Anthony Appiah have failed to ‘adequately demonstrate the validity of indigenous African systems of

thought about which they seem to be uncomfortably apologetic’, hence, they are concerned with questions arising out of the possible exteriority of African philosophy motivated by Western anxieties as the manner in which the authors attempt to frame the foundational problematic in African philosophy as indelibly indebted to a Western paradigm, which in any case, at best, ignores African cultures, and at worst, denigrates them; and 5) that orality should be at the centre of African epistemic projects.

SO: As I mentioned earlier, Nabudere reflected, wrote and acted very powerfully on issues pertaining to the African predicament. It is obvious that he found it necessary to develop an intellectual approach to African problems from a holistic and deeply historical perspective, and hence the reason for the emergence of his notion of Afrikology as a conceptual tool. One would not argue at this point that it has proven to be a perfect tool but at least it grants us some perspective on how to view Africa. What we have, in no unambiguous terms, is an immense possibility of the critical lenses through which we perceive African historical development with a view to re-drawing how Africans see themselves in history, the present and their potentials for future growth.

IMZ: In the comprehensive intent of Nabudere, as you outlined, he fashioned Afrikology as a ‘guiding philosophy to overcome the dichotomies, contradictions,

and disconnect between mind and body caused by the perceived irrelevance of Cartesianism and Western thought generally to African issues’. In this construct, do you think his intent has been realised, if so how, and if not, why?

SO: It is difficult to admit that Nabudere’s intentions have been realised. We struggled daily with subjugation, denigration and neglect of African cosmologies and epistemologies. And this is why the project of Afrikology is really essential. Afrikology provides Africans and peoples of African descent with an unfiltered vehicle through which to speak to ourselves about our pain, sense of loss, hopes and aspirations without an excess of anxiety and self-consciousness; we are also able to speak truthfully to our issues with a sense of rootedness and pride, thereby raising the bar on our conversations and reflections, purging ourselves of unwarranted feelings of shame, guilt and abjection; in this manner, we feel emboldened and nourished with rich and vivid speech, rigorous thought and robust and self-validating historiography.

IMZ: Thank you for writing this book, and for agreeing to this interview.

SO: Once again, I thank you for this incredibly important and wonderful opportunity for reflection and sharing.