

How Amos Tutuola Can Inspire: (re)situating and (re)imagining contemporary sociological knowledge within the context of South Africa, Africa and the Global South*

To address the central theme of this conference – navigating uncertainties, (re)situating and (re)imagining contemporary sociological knowledge in South Africa, Africa and the Global South – I turn to an unlikely intellectual ancestor, Amos Tutuola, for inspiration.

Who was Amos Tutuola?

Amos Tutuola was born in Abeokuta, Nigeria, in 1920. He benefitted from only six years of frequently interrupted formal education, and died on 7 June 1997 desperately seeking completeness in a world of binary oppositions and obsession with winning. Within the framework of colonial education and its hierarchies of credibility, Tutuola was seen by some as an accidental writer or “the unlettered man of letters”. Never wholly endorsed at any given time away or at home, Tutuola’s literary career went from, in the words of Bernth Lindfors, “foreign enchantment and local embarrassment” to “universal but qualified acceptance” through “foreign disenchantment and local reappraisal” between 1952 and 1975 alone.

Tutuola’s parents – Charles and Esther Aina Tutuola – were cocoa farmers and also Christians. Their religion was significant as Christianity, its symbols, morality and beliefs feature prominently in Tutuola’s books, where not even the bush of ghosts is able to escape its ubiquitous grip, and are a clear

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illustration that Tutuola is far from stuck in a frozen African past filled with fear and terror, as some of his critics have suggested.

In his works, Tutuola seeks to reassure his readers that it is possible to be what Charles Taylor terms “open and porous and vulnerable” to a world of spirits, powers and cosmic forces, and still be “disenchanted” enough to have the confidence of Taylor’s “buffered self,” exploring one’s own “powers of moral ordering”.

Equally noteworthy is the fact that Tutuola did not allow his embrace of Christianity to serve as an ideological whip to flog him and his Yoruba cultural beliefs into compliance with the one-dimensionalism of colonial Christianity and the dualistic prescriptiveness of European missionaries, vis-à-vis their African converts. His Christianity simply afforded him an opportunity to add another layer of complexity to his toolkit of personal identification (adopting the name “Amos” for example, without giving up “Tutuola”) and to his Yorubanness of being.

As a Christian named Amos, Tutuola was resolute in turning down an invitation to break with his past

and to disown the gods, beliefs and traditions of his land, even as these were reduced to thunderous silence, often with the complicity of purportedly enlightened Africans. He was at odds with the hypocrisy of some Africans who harkened to Christianity by day and succumbed by night to endogenous African religions disparaged as superstition yet would not own up in broad daylight to being more than just Christians. Studies in contemporary African religions and religiosities attest to the tensions and frustrations felt by many an African with a Christianity unyielding in its preference for conversion over conversation and determined asphyxiation of endogenous religions and belief systems in Africa.

Tutuola served as a servant for a certain Mr F. O. Monu, an Igbo man, from the age of seven. Mr Monu sent him to the Salvation Army school of Abeokuta in 1934. He also attended the Anglican Central School in Abeokuta. Following the death of his father in 1939, Tutuola left school to train as a blacksmith, a trade he practised from 1942 to 1945 for the Royal Air Force in Nigeria. The significance of Tutuola’s employment by the Royal Air Force is worth bearing in mind, as some critics have tended to express surprise at how Tutuola is able to make reference to aeroplanes, bombs and other technological gadgets usually assumed European.

Tutuola tried his hand at several other vocations, including selling bread, as a metal-worker and as a photographer, as well as serving as a messenger for the Nigerian Department of Labour, which he joined in 1948. From 1956 until retirement, he worked as a storekeeper for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation in Ibadan. He married Victoria Alake in 1947 and had eight children with her. He published his first book, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, in 1952, followed by *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* in 1954. In 1967 he published *Ajaiyi and his Inherited Poverty*, with a dedication that read: "In memory of my Mother Mrs. Esther Aina Tutuola who died on 25th November 1964".

How Can Tutuola Inspire the Re(Situation) and Re(Imagination) of the Social Sciences and the Humanities in Africa?

The need to turn to Amos Tutuola for inspiration has become more urgent with recent and surging student protests across universities in Africa seeking decolonisation and transformation of higher education. In South Africa, for example, intensifying student protests for the transformation of an alienating, often racialized, higher education system currently across universities – symbolised by the "Rhodes Must Fall", "Fees Must Fall" and related movements, initiated by students of the University of Cape Town – is an indication that even so-called privileged African students in first-rate African universities feel just as unfulfilled and alienated by an overly Eurocentric index of knowledge and knowledge production. There is almost total discontinuity between the idea of knowledge in African universities and what constitutes knowledge outside universities and in African art and literature.

The student-driven ferment seeks recognition and integration in teaching and research on popular and endogenous forms of knowledge and ways of knowing informed by African experiences and predicaments, and especially by the continent's frontier realities. As a frontier author of frontier stories with little interest in zero-sum games of dominance and conquest, Tutuola is well placed to point us in the direction of more truly inclusive, solidly open-ended Africanised systems of higher education on the continent.

Once despised, exoticised, primitivised and ridiculed as a relic of a dying and forgotten past of a dark continent awakening and harkening to the call of the floodlights of a colonising European civilisation, Tutuola is increasingly influencing younger generations of storytellers and filmmakers, especially following his death in 1997. His brushstrokes are gaining in popularity. New editions of his works are surfacing, and scholars of different disciplinary backgrounds, students and intellectuals of other walks of life who hear of him are keen to locate and read his books. As Wole Soyinka has suggested in an introduction to the 2014 edition of Tutuola's first published novel, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Tutuola appears to be enjoying a "quiet but steady revival" both "within his immediate cultural environment, and across America and Europe". What might account for such growing interest in someone who was for a long time summarily dismissed by elite African intellectuals as an embarrassment and an expensive distraction? I cannot speak for others, but I find Tutuola inspiring for the following reasons.

Tutuola's novels are not just works of fiction. They are founded on the lived realities of Yoruba

society – realities shared with many other communities across the continent – and depict endogenous epistemologies that are very popular in Africa. The stories he recounts are commonplace across the continent. A closer look at the universe depicted by Tutuola suggests it has far more to offer Africa and the rest of the world than was initially provided for by the one-dimensional logic of conquest and completeness championed by European imperialism and colonialism. Tutuola's universe is one in which economies of intimacy go hand-in-hand with a market economy, and where pleasure and work are expected to be carefully balanced, just as balance is expected between affluence and poverty, nature, culture and super nature.

Tutuola draws on popular philosophies of life, personhood and agency in Africa, where the principle of inclusive humanity is celebrated as a matter of course, and the supremacy of reason and logic are not to be taken at face value. Collective success is emphasised (and Black Tax is not a sin or a sign of primitive collectivism), and individuals may not begin to consider themselves to have succeeded unless they can demonstrate the extent to which they have actively included intimate and even distant others (family members and friends, fellow villagers and even fellow nationals and perfect strangers, depending on one's stature and networks) in the success in question.

Tutuola's work, Judith Tabron remarks, "reflects the coexistence of English and Yoruba influences in both his cultural past and present". Indeed, his work in Yorubaised English, contributes to the building blocks of the materialisation of the imagined community known as "Nigeria."

As a *lingua franca*, English (domesticated and otherwise) provided Tutuola and continues to provide other “Nigerian” writers a chance of bridging ethnic divides communicatively and exploring the possibilities and challenges of nationhood, and seeking recognition and relevance in an interconnected and dynamic world.

Despite his unconventional English domesticated by his Yoruba syntax, modest and less than intellectual education in elite African terms, Tutuola has contributed significantly to the resilience of ways of life and worldviews that could easily have disappeared under the weight of extractive colonialism, globalisation and the market economy. His are stories of an accommodating resilience against a tendency towards metanarratives of superiority and conquest championed by the aggressive zero-sum games of the powerful. Tutuola’s stories emphasise conviviality and interdependence, including those between market and gift economies.

Tutuola has much to teach us on how to integrate and draw on popular and widely shared ontologies of incompleteness which he explores extensively in his writings. Through the capacity of his quest heroes to reach beyond the normalcy of their bounded geographies and existence in quests for solutions to predicaments for which they have no readymade conventional answers, Tutuola exposes us to the fathomable and unfathomable richness and possibilities of the crossroads or frontiers as both zones of encounters, and likely and unlikely conversations with difference. Such crossroads encounters and conversations have potential for conviviality as a currency not only in popular African ideas of reality and social action, but also in how we go about doing

justice to the nuanced complexities of what it means to be African in a world of flexible mobilities of people, things and ideas.

Tutuola is a fascinating precursor to ongoing debates on flexible and fluid categories, social and biological bodies, and of how usefully to bring essence and consciousness into fruitful and innovative conversations. Consciousness opens a window to the world in its tangible and intangible, visible and invisible multiplicities, by means of which it constantly enriches itself. He introduces us to the complexity of consciousness not only through the transcendental capacity for presence in simultaneous multiplicities, but also through the reality of intricate interconnections and interdependencies.

Tutuola’s ontologies of incompleteness are usual for (re)situating and (re)imagining sociology. His conceptions of incompleteness could enrich the practice of social science and the humanities in Africa and globally. I suggest that we consider incompleteness as a social reality and form of knowing generative of and dependent on interconnections, relatedness, open-endedness and multiplicities.

Incompleteness harbours emancipatory potentials and inspires unbounded creativity and hopefully a reclamation of more inclusionary understandings of being human and being in general. Incompleteness is not a unidirectional concept. Every social organisational category is incomplete without the rest of what it takes to be human through relationships with other humans, as well as with non-humans or other beings – in the natural and supernatural worlds. Africa is incomplete without the rest of the world, and the world is incomplete without Africa.

Social sciences and humanities steeped in the dualisms of colonial ways of knowing and producing knowledge in Africa are ill-prepared to midwife the renaissance of African ways of knowing and knowledge production that have been victims of unequal encounters with Western colonialism and its zero-sum games of completeness and winner takes all.

To achieve such an epistemological turn, African scholars and academics would have to turn to and seek to be cultivated afresh by ordinary Africans immersed in popular traditions of meaning making. As Tutuola’s experiences as a writer illustrate, these people in rural areas and urban villages are the very same Africans to whom the modern intellectual elite in their ivory towers tries to deny the right to think and represent their realities in accordance with the civilisations and universes they know best. Many scholars schooled in Western modernity push away or even run from these worldviews and conceptions of reality. Instead of creating space for the fruit of “the African mind” as a tradition of knowledge, they are all too eager, under the gawking eyes of their Western counterparts, to label and dismiss (however hypocritically) as traditional or superstitious the creative imagination of their fellow Africans.

The full valorisation of African potentialities in future social scientific endeavours depends on the extent to which scholars in the social sciences and humanities in or of Africa are able to (re)familiarise themselves with and encourage these popular modes of knowing and knowledge-making in the production of social knowledge. There is a clear need to decentre social sciences and the humanities from their preponderantly parochial

or provincial, not to mention patriarchal, Eurocentric origins and biases and from illusions of completeness, and for African researchers and scholars to (re) immerse themselves and be grounded in endogenous African universes and the interconnecting global and local hierarchies that shape and are shaped by them.

Tutuola's use of the idea of crossroads and frontiers as zones of contact, possibility and renewal in the stories he tells is fascinating and inspirational. Africans who are able to successfully negotiate change and continuity by reaching out and taking in what they encounter at the crossroads and bringing into conversation various dichotomies and binaries qualify as frontier Africans. Their frontier-ness comes from their continual straddling of myriad identity margins and bridging of various divides. This encourages them to recognise and provide for the interconnections, nuances and complexities in their lives made possible or exacerbated by technologically inspired and enhanced mobilities and encounters. In this regard, there is an interesting conversation to be had between forms of mobility and the capacity to tame time and space, inspired by *jujus* or spells and charms in Tutuola's universe, and the forms of mobility and presence made possible by new information and communication technologies such as the television, internet, cell and smart phones.

Popular ideas of reality and the reality of frontier Africans suggest an approach to social action in which interconnections, interrelationships, interdependencies, collaboration, coproduction and compassion are emphasised, celebrated and rewarded. Within this framework of conviviality, intricate entanglements and manglements, if hierarchies of

social actors and actions exist, it is reassuring to know that nothing is permanent or singular about the nature, order and form of such hierarchies, and that no one or nothing has the monopoly of action.

Commitment to crossroads conversations across divides makes frontier Africans express discomfort with suggestions or ambitions of absolute autonomy in action and reject ideas that humans are superior to any other beings and that a unified and singular self is the only unit of analysis for human action. In the absence of permanence, the freedom to pursue individual or group goals exists within a socially predetermined frame that emphasises collective interests at the same time that it allows for individual creativity and self-activation.

Social visibility derives from (or is facilitated by) being interconnected with other humans and the wider world of nature, the supernatural and the imaginary in an open-ended communion of interests. Being social is not limited to familiar circles or to fellow humans, as it is expected that even the passing stranger (human or otherwise, natural or supernatural) from a distant land or from out of this world should benefit from the sociality that one has cultivated on familiar shores.

The logic of collective action that underpins the privileging of interconnections and frontier beings is instructive in a situation where nothing but change is permanent, and where life is a currency in perpetual circulation. The tendency towards temporality, transience or impermanence calls for social actors to de-emphasise or domesticate personal success and maximise collective endeavours. It calls for humility and the interment of mentalities and practices of absolutes and conquest.

The Attractive Conviviality in Popular African Ideas of Reality and Social Action

Scholars interested in rethinking African social sciences and humanities could maximise and capitalise upon the currency of conviviality in popular African ideas of reality and social action evident in Tutuola's writings.

Conviviality is recognition and provision for the fact or reality of being incomplete. If incompleteness is the normal order of things, conviviality invites us to celebrate and preserve incompleteness and mitigate delusions of grandeur that come with ambitions and claims of perfection.

Conviviality emphasises the repair rather than the rejection of human relationships with fellow humans as well as with the non-human world. It is more about cobbling and less about ruptures. It is fundamental to being human – biologically and socially – and necessary for processes of social renewal, reconstruction and regeneration.

Conviviality depicts diversity, tolerance, trust, equality, inclusiveness, cohabitation, coexistence, mutual accommodation, interaction, interdependence, getting along, generosity, hospitality, congeniality, festivity, civility and privileging peace over conflict, among other forms of sociality.

Convivial Scholarship as an Answer to Delusions of Completeness

Granted the intricacies of popular conceptions of reality, and in view of the frontier reality of many an ordinary African caught betwixt and between exclusionary and prescriptive regimes of being and belonging, nothing short of convivial scholarship would do justice to the legitimate quest for

an epistemological reconfiguration of African universities and the disciplines, a reconfiguration informed by popular agency and epistemologies.

In convivial scholarship the logic of inclusion is prioritised over the logic of exclusion and the violence of conquest. It is a scholarship most likely to provide for and take seriously comprehensive depictions of endogenous universes in Africa wherein reality is more than meets the eye and the world an experience of life beyond sensory perceptions.

A truly convivial scholarship is one which does not seek a priori to define and confine Africans into particular territories or geographies, particular racial and ethnic categories, particular classes, genders, generations, religions or whatever other identity marker is ideologically in vogue.

Convivial scholarship confronts and humbles the challenge of over-prescription, over-standardisation, over-routinisation, and over-prediction. It is critical and evidence-based (though not in the limited sense of the observational sciences); it challenges problematic labels, especially those that seek to unduly oversimplify the social realities of the people, places and spaces it seeks to understand and explain.

Convivial scholarship recognises the deep power of collective imagination and the importance of interconnections and nuanced complexities.

It is a scholarship that questions assumptions of a priori locations and bounded ideas of power and all other forms of relationships that shape and are shaped by the sociocultural, political and economic circumstances of social actors.

It is a scholarship that sees the local in the global and the global in the local by bringing them into informed conversations, conscious of the hierarchies and power relations at play at both the micro and macro levels of being and becoming. Convivial scholarship is scholarship that neither dismisses contested and contrary perspectives a priori nor throws the baby out with the bathwater.

It is critical scholarship of recognition and reconciliation, scholarship that has no permanent friends, enemies or alliances beyond the rigorous and committed quest for truth in its complexity and nuance, and using the results of aspirations for a common humanity that is in communion with the natural and supernatural environments that make a balanced existence possible.

Convivial scholarship does not impose what it means to be human, just as it does not prescribe a single version of the good life in a world peopled by infinite possibilities, tastes and value systems. Rather, it encourages localised conversations of a truly global nature on competing and complementary processes of social cultivation through practice, performance and experience, without pre-empting or foreclosing particular units of analysis in a world in which the messiness of encounters and relationships frowns on binaries, dichotomies and dualisms. Indeed, like Tutuola's universe, convivial scholarship challenges us, however grounded we may be in our disciplines and their logics of practice, to cultivate the disposition to be present everywhere at the same time.

It is a scholarship that cautions disciplines, their borders and gatekeepers to open up and embrace the crossroads culture of presence in simultaneous multiplicity and concomitant epistemologies of

interconnections. With convivial scholarship, there are no final answers, only permanent questions and ever exciting new angles of questioning.

Conclusion

Tutuola suggests ways for vulnerable Africans to challenge victimhood. In his stories, very ordinary Africans are quite simply extraordinary in their capacity to challenge victimisation and the brutal and brutish games of power and conquest. His stories challenge the illusion of the autonomous, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent individual by inviting the reader to embrace and celebrate incompleteness as the normal order of being and of things. They suggest an epistemology of conviviality in which interdependence is privileged and delusions of grandeur and completeness discouraged. Rich and poor are co-implicated and mutually entangled in Tutuola's universe of the elusiveness of completeness.

Tutuola himself epitomises the universe he depicts, not only through his own cunning and trickery, prankishness and elusive quest for completeness in a world of zero-sum games of civilisations founded on exclusionary violence, but also by pointing a critical finger at the modern African intellectual elite who have unquestioningly yielded to a narrow Eurocentric index of civilisation and humanity, founded on borrowing without acknowledgement and on the fallacy of the permanently activated autonomous self.

Note

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