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## **Mapping the field of Indigenous knowledges in anti-colonial discourse: a transformative journey in education**

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This paper interrogates Indigenous knowledge and practices a crucial form of anti-colonial resistance. It aims to capture the fluidity between the past and present, recognizing that the former cannot be quarantined from the latter. In this exploratory discussion, I argue that Indigenous knowledge is a living experience that is informed by ancestral voices. Within this context, I examine anti-colonial discourses as articulated by scholars in the 1960s and as they are taken up today. Discourses are ways of referring to, or constructing knowledge about, a particular topic, practice, social activity or institutional site in society. In doing so, I aim to share with the reader my struggle with colonial education and to elicit a dialogue on questions about how we, individually and collectively, can disrupt the entrenchment of this type of education. These questions include: How did colonial systems of education disrupt the spiritual and cultural beliefs and traditional ways of life of African peoples? How have colonized peoples, especially African women, resisted, and how do they continue to resist, colonial education? And how can the engagement of Indigenous Knowledge transform pedagogical approaches, curriculum, and learning in the academy? In exploring these questions, I will examine the concept of knowledge production: who controls knowledge and whose knowledge is valid. My reflections are grounded in my experiences as an African woman caught between a European education system and a traditional knowledge base.

**Keywords:** Indigenous knowledge; anti-colonial

### **Introduction**

I cannot read or write. I know nothing, but I know when a cyclone is coming from the north-east. (Statement by a Bengali man, proclaimed in the documentary *Savage Sea*)

The encounter between the colonizer and colonized subjects disrupted ways of knowing, learning, and teaching for most Indigenous peoples in the world. It also resulted in loss of lands, the erosion of cultures and ideas, and most importantly, the colonization of minds. Edward Said (1994) provides insight into the processes of colonization and imperialism when he argues that

... territory and possessions are at stake, geography and power. Everything about human history is rooted in the earth, which has meant that we must think about habitation, but it has also meant that people have planned to have more territory and therefore must do something about its Indigenous residents. (Said, 1994, p. 7)

‘Doing something’ about Indigenous people ranges from genocide and rewriting history to denying their existence, devaluing their knowledges, and debasing their cultural beliefs and

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practices. This has been done through, among other mechanisms, western systems of education, texts, and literature, thereby making the business of education and knowledge production contested terrains. Yet, colonialism and anti-colonial resistance are two sides of the same coin for Indigenous peoples, who have always resisted oppression through storytelling, spirituality, and keeping traditional ways of life alive by valuing ancestry and the wisdom of elders. In order for educators to discuss ways of knowing, teaching and learning for Indigenous people, it is imperative that we ground our analysis in the history of those people—that history which connects the present with colonial and neo-colonial pasts (Chabal, 1996).

This paper interrogates Indigenous knowledge and practices a crucial form of anti-colonial resistance. It aims to capture the fluidity between the past and present, recognizing that the former cannot be quarantined from the latter (Said, 1994). In this exploratory discussion, I argue that Indigenous knowledge is a living experience that is informed by ancestral voices. Within this context, I examine anti-colonial discourses as articulated by scholars in the 1960s and as they are taken up today. Discourses are ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic, practice, social activity, or institutional site in society (Hall, 1994, p. 6). In doing so, I aim to share with the reader my struggle with colonial education and to elicit a dialogue on questions about how we, individually and collectively, can disrupt the entrenchment of this type of education. These questions include: How did colonial systems of education disrupt the spiritual and cultural beliefs and traditional ways of life of African peoples? How have colonized peoples, especially African women, resisted, and how do they continue to resist, colonial education? And how can the engagement of Indigenous knowledge transform pedagogical approaches, curriculum, and learning in the academy? In exploring these questions, I will examine the concept of knowledge production: who controls knowledge and whose knowledge is considered valid. My reflections are grounded in my experiences as an African woman caught between a European education system and a traditional knowledge base.

### **Brief background on my colonial education**

Elsewhere (Wane, 2003), I have reflected on my education in Kenya and on how, in my childhood growing up in a former British colony (Kenya), I took pride in going to school and learning everything about western countries. My parents wanted me to acquire a European education, an education that would remove me from my rural upbringing and enable me to lead a different and supposedly ‘better’ life (Wane, 2003). Indeed, the acquisition of a European education enabled me and other Africans to travel to Europe and America to further our education. Thus, of all aspects of western colonial mechanisms, the one that Africans found most seductive was formal western education. Africans acquiring literacy in English or French were quick to realize that a university education opened up prospects for economic advancement, individual attainment, and would ultimately provide keys to political power and self-government or self-advancement.

For 75 years Kenya was under the British rule; the people’s social structures were disrupted and damaged, their cultural beliefs were devalued. The colonial Government managed to create doubt in people’s mind about who they were, to the point where parents advocated a colonial education for their children even after independence was attained in 1963. For instance, I attended missionary schools from Grade 5 to Grade 12. All of my teachers were White nuns, and I followed a British curriculum and memorized material written by western scholars to pass British set examinations. I took pride in reading and

reciting works of Shakespeare, D. H. Lawrence, Bernard Shaw, Hemingway and Dickens, and I regarded others who did not read or enjoy reading these books as backward and illiterate. As I have noted elsewhere:

I thought that Ngugi Wa Thian'go, who began in the 1970s to decry the 'colonial mentality' and to promote the virtues of writing in African languages, was a whining, troublesome English professor. I took it for granted that English was one of the languages of Africa, because it was, along with Swahili, an official language in my country. People who spoke English were/are considered educated. I never imagined that anyone would tell me or that I would come to the realization that the English language and foreign education were a form of colonization, and that the beliefs that were inculcated in me were not really mine, that all the people and cultural symbols I was celebrating were simply not mine. In this blissful ignorance, it did not occur to me to question even the most obvious assumptions implicit in my education such as why the written word was valued over traditional knowledges and why nothing was Kenyan and African histories were absent in the curriculum. (Wane, 2003, p. 321)

Colonization of the mind was thus easily achievable in the Kenyan independent state. The education that I received reinforced very strong western values and created a desire to aspire for 'Whiteness'. It should be understood that colonialization through education was actually part of a much bigger and lengthier process. All the learning was embedded in a social structure designed to erode traditional knowledges and values. Colonial education succeeded in planting seeds for the expansion, growth, and sustainability of imperialism. This is eloquently captured by Said (1984) as the 'process or policy of establishing and maintaining an empire, lingering where it has always been in general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological economic and social practices' (p. 9). In other words, education was an organized form of imperialism that allowed colonization to continue by indoctrinating new subjects.

Unknown to me, the act of being schooled in the literary canons so valued in Europe caused me to be disassociated from and devalue the cultural knowledges and wisdom of my ancestors, my community, and my family.

### **African women and the decolonization process**

The journey towards personal decolonizing and reclaiming continues and, in many ways, mirrors the journey of the African continent in general and Kenya in particular. Anti-colonial resistance is a long and central component of the African experience. Although this is evident all over the continent, anti-colonial discourses within the context of attempting to reclaim Indigenous African identities are best captured in the work of African writers. The works of Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Albert Memmi, Wole Soyinka, Ashis Nandy, Aimé Césaire, among others, provide excellent analyses of the destruction of social fabric of their communities. Achebe in his novel *Things fall apart* examines the disruption of the Ibo society in Nigeria as a result of colonization. Achebe shows the values of the Ibo cultural traditions and challenges the belief that African societies have no history or culture. Likewise, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's work on the Decolonizing of the mind shows how Kenyan people's pre-colonial cultures and history have been rendered 'invalid' through language dominance and therefore calls for the preservation of local/ Indigenous languages and also ways of teaching and learning. Unfortunately, these earlier voices of decolonization deplored the lack of representation of women's voices (Sadaawi, 1997, pp. 143–208). Early works on education and colonization in Africa lacked a representation of women's voices and roles. For instance, women fall outside of Fanon's account in *Black skin, white masks*.

Although the relationship with anti-colonial or nationalist discourse based on issues of gender is complex, there are some concerns in relation to the subordinate pace with which women have been reassigned in decolonized societies in the aftermath of anti-colonial struggles (Moore-Gilbert, 1996).

African women have been writing to challenge colonialism. Indeed, generations of African women writers have built their careers on intimately interrogating the micro- and macro-effects of colonialism and resistance strategies undertaken within their communities. For example, Flora Nwapa, through her fiction (see her earlier novels, *Efuru*, 1966, and *Idu*, 1971) depicts the struggles of Nigerian people as they try to make sense of their exploitation by colonialism and capitalism in the midst of civil war and authoritarianism. Nwapa, like other women authors, exposes the hegemonic order in a society wrapped in a history of colonialism and patriarchy. Although Nwapa repeatedly denied being a feminist, much of her work does address questions of tradition and transformation for women. Nwapa skillfully weaves together traditional Igbo mores and myths to provide a complex analysis of women struggling for independence in their societies. However, within the confines of patriarchal cultures and an emphasis on nationalism that limits women's agency, women's voices are fewer and far between.

Yet African women are the guardians of traditional knowledge and leaders in resistance struggles. Women's art of traditional teaching through storytelling, riddles, proverbs and idioms is as ancient as the people themselves. Most African societies acknowledge the fact that oral traditional teachings facilitate the inculcation of socially desirable values such as hard work, honesty, thrift, and wisdom (Aliyu, 1997). Through narration, women pass on knowledges of African cultures and ways of knowing. For instance, Aliyu provides an excellent analysis of how Hausa women in Northern Nigeria act as keepers of knowledge despite the disruption. She goes on to show the disruption, through colonialism, of traditional ways of teaching. She states that colonialism introduced money, taxes and wage employment, which destroyed the traditional infrastructure and dragged the Hausa community into the dominant capitalist system. Although there was no specific legislation forbidding traditional ways of teaching, the introduction of the capitalist systems brought tremendous changes into Hausa societies. This, of course, is not unique to Nigeria, but it is very common in colonized societies. My purpose in this paper is to demonstrate that despite the efforts of colonizers to disrupt Indigenous practices, women's role as traditional teachers has never ceased. They have continued their feminist work in different ways so as to end their silence and speak their truths, as they know them. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) eloquently captures how women continue to struggle for their emancipation through their work and writings, to challenge the seven mountains of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and patriarchy.<sup>1</sup>

### **Decolonization and resistance: using a feminist lens**

Amina Mama (1997) has captured the essence of many African feminists who are interrogating and reconceptualizing gender relations by situating the discussion in a historical and social setting. She also emphasizes that we should not lose sight of the fact that Africa is a collective:

Being conquered by the colonizing powers; being culturally and materially subjected to a nineteenth-century European racial hierarchy and its gender politics; being indoctrinated into all-male European administrative systems, and the insidious paternalism of the new religious and educational systems ... has persistently affected all aspects of social, cultural, political and economic life in postcolonial African states. (Mama, 1997, p. 47)

Feminism can be applied cross-culturally through time by examining all aspects of human life and black women's struggles for liberation in such diverse areas as race, gender, religion, culture, sexuality and class (Terborg-Penn, 1989). It is a framework that African feminists, such as Ama Ata Aidoo, have applied to confront the negative representation of Africa and its people:

I grew up knowing that Europeans had dubbed Africa 'The Dark Continent'. ... That expression was first used in the Nineteenth Century. Since then its ugly odor has clung to Africa, all things African, Africans and people of African descent everywhere, and has not faded yet. ... I am not a psychologist or a psychoanalyst. However, I do know that it has not been easy living with that burden. Africans have been the subject of consistent and bewildering pseudo-scholarship, always aimed at proving that they are not inferior human beings. Even when there was genuine knowledge it was handled perniciously: by anthropologists and social engineers, cranial and brain-size scientists, sundry bell-curvers, doomsday, medical and other experts. (Ama Ata Aidoo, 2000)

African women struggling on behalf of themselves and of the wider community are very much a part of African people's heritage. Many African feminists such as Aidoo try to demystify the fallacy of feminism as a western or borrowed ideology. They emphasize the centrality of African women's gendered consciousness in relation to society's liberation and education. The roots of African feminism are found in the features of most African societies that stress the ideology of communal, rather than individual, values and the preservation of a community as a whole. However, during colonialism, African societies, and in particular African women's lives, changed drastically. Traditional systems were disrupted, while those reinforcing inequality were cultivated. For instance, in Algeria, the colonial administration felt that to destroy:

... the structure of Algerian society and its capacity for resistance, [they had] first of all to conquer the women ... go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves and in the houses where the men keep them out of sight. (Fanon, 1967, p. 23)

However, it was this colonialist's frenzy to unveil the Algerian woman that was to provoke the native's resistance. Algerian women, like other African women, fought side by side with their men during the liberation wars. There was a rebirth of a new kind of African feminism that emerged in the face of oppression (Steady, 1989).<sup>2</sup> In the New World, African women have taken up activism and resisted exploitation. Steady (1989) argues that the exploitation of Africans through slavery and their appropriation through colonization, imperialism, and apartheid meant that African women had to fight to ensure the survival of their families, thus giving rise to another aspect of African feminism within the anti-colonial discourse—a discourse that is grounded in both the contemporary and historical lived experiences of a particular society or group of people. In this renewed feminist discourse, African women have called upon their spirituality and self-reliance skills as tools to deal with domination and exploitation and have continued to play the drums. As an African woman, it has, therefore, become important for me to centre my decolonizing efforts on the traditional teachings of my grandmothers that have come to play a great role in my feminist theorizing.

### **Decolonizing the self**

Decolonizing oneself is the most difficult process. Most Indigenous people who have been subjected to western education become a commodity of western ideology. Malidoma Some,

the author of *Of water and the spirit*, suggests that in order to distance yourself from this form of education, ‘there are certain wires in the psyche that one must cut under certain abusive circumstances in order to survive’ (Some, 1994, p. 111). Malidoma Some’s book provides a detailed description of how he struggled to decolonize himself, in a process that he undertook to be re-educated in his traditions. As a child going through colonial education, you must be prepared to pay a price when you challenge your educators. When Malidoma Some challenged the brutality he faced through colonial education he was punished, and in the end he had to leave the missionary school and go back to his village. However, after Malidoma Some returned to his people, he became aware that this was not enough—he still carried within him colonialism itself. He had to be subjected to a serious of rituals to reclaim his spirit, mind, and soul. The effects of this colonial education were not easily left behind as articulated by his community:

... you carry something in you, something very subtle, something that comes from your contact with the [western thought] .... One of our concerns is whether it is possible for you to be here and there at the same time. (Malidoma Some 1994, 176)

At the beginning of Malidoma Some’s decolonization, his elders talked to him about his centre:

... each one of us possesses a center that they grow away from after birth. To be born is to lose contact with our center, and to grow from childhood to adulthood is to walk away from it. ... The center is both within and without. It is everywhere. But we must realize it exists, find it, and be with it, for without the center we cannot tell who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. No one’s center is like someone else’s. Find your own center, not the center of your neighbour, not the center of our mother or father or family or ancestor but that center which is yours and yours alone. When there is a center there are four live parts to the circle; the rising part in the east and its right side, the north, the setting part in the west and its right side, the south. (Malidoma Some 1994, 198)

In my effort to decolonize my own mind, I identified the limitations, and questioned the politics of western feminism, which did not speak entirely to my experiences as an African woman. This realization informed my Ph.D. research work and the urge to search for my Indigenous roots as a part of the journey to decolonize my mind.

There are many tales that I could narrate to explain the path that I have traveled. The colonial education to which I was exposed in Kenya nurtured a desire to continue my studies in the west and to pursue a western way of life. Consequently, I accepted a scholarship to pursue an MA degree in a Canadian university. I was not exactly sure what I expected my new lifestyle would be, but I was sure I was going to live a Hollywood life, an illusion that had been created through education, curriculum, western media, and texts. Little did I know that not everyone in the west lived in big houses and drove big cars and wore expensive, ‘fashionable’ clothes. I was shocked to realize that securing a shared basement apartment was considered an accomplishment. My first impressions of Canada collapsed my illusions, my lifelong goals, and my desires. I had seen many homeless people on the streets of Nairobi. I had seen many people who had very little in terms of material worth in Kenya. My colonial education had seared my consciousness and I had become indoctrinated in the belief of meritocracy, which led to a belief that such poor unfortunates were responsible for their own misfortunes. I had been schooled in a narrow conception of class and firmly believed that their situation was solely the result of a lack of motivation and that as a diligent student, I was destined to succeed. I was confident that success in higher education would necessarily translate into economic security. With this belief firmly implanted in my mind,



I traveled to Canada, the land where everyone would live in big homes, drive big cars and employ several house helpers.

During my graduate years, when taking my first feminist course/class, I felt disengaged as many of the issues that were being discussed did not mirror reality as I knew it, instead reflecting a Eurocentric perspective. I felt a rug had been pulled from underneath my feet. There was very little mention of African people and particularly women who, I knew, had worked hard to educate their children and provide for their families. In this feminist class, any time African women were mentioned; it was with respect to high birth rates, poverty, and oppression. Whenever I tried to challenge the distorted perspective being presented, my contestations were greeted with blank stares or awkward silences. Ultimately, the class discussion would continue as if I had not spoken. Continual experiences such as these caused me to search for something to hold onto, and it was at that point that I realized how little I knew about my culture. In quest of ideological emancipation, I went back to my subconscious to begin my decolonizing journey and to search for the feminist teachings of my grandmothers, mothers, and aunts in my early years while growing up in Kenya.

Coming to Canada ‘forced’ me to search for my centre because the colonial education had led me to leave my family behind. I had worked hard in school lured by the material promises held out by a western colonial education. However, upon coming to Canada, the cold hand of reality burst that bubble. My higher education could not even guarantee me decent accommodation while I was pursuing further education. The colonial education had failed to ‘deliver’ on its material promises. The ‘failed’ promises made me ‘reach’ into my subconscious, drawing strength from my cultural values. It was only at this point that the impact of my colonial education began to dawn on me: my cultural beliefs and Indigenous ways of knowing the world had been devalued to the point that I had lost my innate connection with these teachings. I found myself longing for African music, food, clothing and spirituality. With this realization, I was able to use my Ph.D. research as an avenue to return to my roots and learn from the women in my village. Today, as a faculty member of a western university, I have striven to connect my Indigenous research with my teaching and my writing. My courses reflect my decolonizing journey—it is an ongoing endeavour that will never end until each one of us, regardless of our race, gender, ethnicity, religion, etc, find our centre and start the decolonizing of self. It is for this reason that I situate my analysis in African feminism to analyze Indigenous women’s knowledge, and colonial education, and construct a theory that begins with the cosmology common to traditional African women and provides a source for historical analysis.

### **Indigenous knowledge, cultures and teaching**

Colonialism, according to Shiva (2000), has been from the very beginning a contest over the mind and intellect. Smith (1999, p. 88) reminds us of the direct relationship between the expansion of knowledge, trade and the British Empire. As I reflect on my colonial education, I cannot deny the lingering (in)visible traces of the Eurocentric models of talking, theorizing and even living, which have imprinted on my intellect. This is evidenced, for example by the lifestyle that I have adopted which is very different from that of my parents or my siblings who never made it through the prescribed education system. No matter how I try to decolonize myself by reading literature that is written in African languages only, wearing African attire especially when I go to work, eat African foods only, I am still a product of Euro–Canadian–American education. There is a clear tension between my Indigenous African ways and Euro–Canadian modes of thinking. These tensions are reflected in the courses I teach and in my research. Every research project I have carried out employs both



Eurocentric methods and African Indigenous orality research tools. And the irony of it is, I am constantly justifying to my participants why I am employing, for instance, proverbs, story telling or idioms.

Eurocentric discourses serve the purpose of justifying the neo-colonial agenda, which remains deeply embedded in systems of education that influence current educational approaches at the international, national, and local levels. I have always believed that colonialism began as an imaginary idea—a thought that got translated into a philosophy, a creed, and a way of life. Implementation of this imagination had tangible consequences for those deemed in need of changing to fit the new order: people's land was taken away from them and people's physical and mental capacities were controlled through forced indoctrination and exploitation of their vulnerabilities. My ancestral land was not taken away by the White settlers, but by people who looked like me, who had acquired the power through neo-colonial Government when Kenya attained its independence in 1964. I can still remember the look on my mother's face when the Government surveyors walked through the family land where she was getting ready for planting. Although, I must have been three- or four-years-old, I can still hear my mother's cry echo in my memory: '... you cannot take this land from us. This land has always been part of this family, this clan. The Wazungu's (White people) did not take it from us, why are you taking this from us—what good will it do to you to take something from your own people? What do you know about this land except that it has the highest yield crops and that there is a spring under that tree?'

I can still hear my mothers' cry of despair as the men pushed her away when she pulled out the beacons that they were using to demarcate the land, signifying that it did not belong to us any more. The taking away of this land from my family created tension and rift between my family/clan and the new owners—tensions that have been felt by grandchildren from either side. Although this incident took place close to 40 years ago, the whole scenario is very vivid in my mind. The debate on land, education, culture, teachings and Indigenous knowledge is really inseparable from colonialism and neo-colonialism and we cannot discuss one without the other. 'Indigenous' is a loaded term, with its coinage inextricably linked to colonialism. However, what does it mean to me? My African Indigenous knowledge and specifically knowledge that is informed by cultural norms, values, beliefs of Embu people (my ancestral lineage) is directly rooted to the land, the rituals and the teachings that accompany these rituals. After our ancestral land was taken away, my parents performed land and healing rituals. I still have vague memories of the various ceremonies that took place on our homestead. The throngs of people who came to see my parents and the whispers and talking in riddles made very little sense to me at the time. However, my Ph.D. research enabled me to revisit the whole question of ancestral land and healing rituals to try and fill the gaps that became oblivious when I tried to remember the incident. Although by the time I went back home to carry out my research, my mother had passed on to the ancestral world, her spirit guided me throughout my research and with my father's assistance and other mothers from my clan, I was able to put the various pieces together. This opportunity provided space for me to learn, observe and even participate in some rituals. This learning gave me the chance to reclaim these rituals and contest the perspective of the colonizer which portrayed them as primitive and backward.

Such practices honour African ways of knowing and creating knowledge Indigenous African learning plays a vital role in the transmission of values considered essential in understanding and experiencing the fullness of life. It is interwoven in the fabric of African life and inseparable from African religions or spirituality. When African people talk about education, they make a distinction between formal and non-formal, or informal, education. It is, however, important to note that the term 'education'—going to school—is somehow

removed from what African people conceptualize as learning and teaching. In Indigenous societies, knowledge is collectively and communally shared, and not monopolized by individuals. However, individual elders may preserve knowledge for the community. Various members share knowledge while specific elders from the community remain its custodians (Agrawal, 1995). As a result, Indigenous communities find intellectual property agreements culturally and ethically alien to their traditions and ways of living, as Indigenous technology is defined as a community-owned technology—there are no patent rights (Nandy, 1987; Bereano, 1995; Harding, 1998). There is no intellectual property ownership for the exclusive benefit of an elite few. It is intended for all members of a community, including children.

This experience reinforces much of the emerging literature on Indigenous knowledges which challenge traditional Euro conceptions of non-western systems of thought as primitive. As Shiva (2000) has written, colonial history has constantly emphasized that non-western peoples such as Africans, Asians and Aboriginal peoples—whose Indigenous knowledge has been systematically usurped and then destroyed by the colonizing west (Shiva, 2000)—were ignorant, primitive, and inferior and their knowledge, education, or ways of knowledge were of lesser value (Maurial, 1999; Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). Through my research, I discovered that the Embu people knew the right language to use when addressing the land issues, they knew the appropriate sayings to appease the ancestors who were buried on land that was taken away. The people of the clan knew what healing rituals were suitable for my mother, whose spirit seemed to have left her when the surveyors stepped on ‘her’ family’s land. When I inquired what herbs were given to my mother, the women said that they were Indigenous medicines that would give her the strength to accept what had befallen her family’s land and to try and ‘talk’ to what was left for her to cultivate to provide enough food for her family. Reading Semali and Kincheloe’s work which explains that the term ‘Indigenous’ and the concept of Indigenous knowledge have often been associated in the western context with the primitive, the wild, and the natural, I could not help but imagine that any one witnessing the unfamiliar rituals would quite easily classify them as ancient and ‘uncivilized’. My going back to search for answers has revealed to me how much there is in terms of the richness of Indigenous knowledge and how much it can offer to understand and to fill the gaps created by neo-colonial education. In addition, my research revealed that there are remnants of Indigenous knowledge that resides in people’s collective memories and can easily be tapped whenever it is required. My efforts to learn from my Elders have enriched me. Today, I do not speculate or guess on what herbs to use for cleansing, common colds or emotional healings. Today, I do not have to guess the teaching derived from proverbs, idioms or drums. These have become part of who I am, despite the dissonance that has been created within me. What is also amazing is that, for most Indigenous people from Africa, Asia, Latin America and North America, Indigenous knowledge is reflected in some form in their life—this could be in the form of cultural beliefs, folk knowledge, or their spirituality.

Scholars such as Maurial (1999), Wangoola (2000), Castellano (2000) and Shiva (2000), among others, state that Indigenous knowledge is an outcome of interactions that occur among families and communities. Indigenous knowledge is holistic, and there is no division between different forms of knowledge, teaching, or learning. All the learning and teachings are intertwined within the context of everyday interactions. My research revealed that, for instance, if there was sickness in the family, the rituals performed entailed looking at the individual, the family, the community as well as the clan’s members. In order to make proper diagnoses of the disease, it was not enough to treat the visible symptoms, but to look for the root cause. In most instances, the sickness could be

traced to emotional disequilibrium caused by acts such as taking away a people's land through uncustomary manner. The healing rituals that followed such acts were both educational and prayerful.

Members of the community generated this form of knowledge, and then passed it on to the next generation through storytelling, observation, songs, ceremonies, or traditional rituals. There are many definitions of what constitutes Indigeneity, but most agree that Indigenous people have a common group history of traditions, cultures, and languages and continue to depend on the environment and land of their ancestors. This is not to imply that Indigenous people are homogeneous. Quite the contrary, Indigenous people are spread throughout the world, often dispersed over large segments of land. Indigenous people do not necessarily share beliefs, languages, cultures, or ethics with one another nor can there be a predictable type of Indigenous identity that educators or policy-makers could use as a model. As indicated by my own research, Indigenous knowledge is very specific to a group of people as I have noted elsewhere (Wane, 2002).

The quantity and quality of Indigenous knowledges depend on the age and particular role of a person in society. Indigenous knowledges are stored in people's minds and dispersed through stories, songs, proverbs, and everyday practices. The knowledge is not recorded, so no one can claim title to it, but rather it is accessible to everyone (Nandy, 1987; Nathani, 1996; Harding, 1998; Dei, 2000). Indigenous knowledges are concerned not just with yield but also with the holistic sustainability of interconnected ecological systems. The social organization of Indigenous ways of knowing is such that both natural and artificial infrastructures should sustain and support themselves. Indigenous knowledges are applied, not abstracted, and particular to the environment and to other specific needs.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1985) suggests that, in order for African people to liberate themselves from the colonial-based stranglehold, they have to revisit their creative initiatives in history. One of the choices he advocates is the reclamation of language in order to define people in relation to their social environment and cultural universe. Wa Thiong'o laments his loss due to colonial education:

Language was not a mere string of words. It had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning ... the languages, through images and symbols, gave us a view of the world, but it had a beauty of its own. The home and the field were then our primary school ... and then I went to school, a colonial school, and this harmony was broken. The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture. (Ngugi Wa Thiong'o 1985, 11)

Every language is the custodian of its speakers' cultural experiences, which are often the result of their many centuries of interaction with their physical milieu, inter- and intra-ethnic contacts, and relations with the supernatural world (Batido, 2001, p. 312). In the loss of language is the loss of knowledge and wisdom. I can attest to that. Today, my own children cannot articulate themselves clearly in my language—because when they were born, I thought it was more impressive to let people know that my children's first language was English. I have tried in different ways to teach my children Kiembu, but they have resisted. Despite my insistence that the richness of the messages of the stories I tell them are lost in translation, I am unable to convey the depth of this loss to them. For instance, I have told them over and over again about my mother's words when the land was taken away, but the strength evoked by her words are lost—My mothers uttered the following words: '... auwi, anyia,, ciana ciakwa ki mwiganirwe in maundu ma kimira—ni mwici muthetu oyu and maundu ma yo, niki mwareka maundu my thi matongurie ngoro na meciria manyu?' For the first two words, there is no translation; for the rest of the words, I will translate them as they appear: 'Children, mine why you do not know traditional protocols of the land, do you know

this soil and what it hold? Why do you allow greed and desires of this world take over your hearts and thoughts?’

The translated words have no feeling of pain or despair; they do not hold that deep respect for the land that is clearly present in her kiambu words. The young surveyors were following instructions issued from the land office and they interpreted Mama’s wailing as a nuisance and a hindrance to their work. Language is a powerful tool for colonizing people’s minds.

In most neo-colonial societies foreign languages, e.g., English or French, have become the measure of intelligence and the ability to learn and advance in one’s career. These European languages have become the main determinant of a child’s ability to master formal education. According to Wa Thiong’o, language has been used to take children further and further from themselves, their cultures and their worlds to other worlds. The foreign language inculcates a foreign culture and its values in children. The education that the children are exposed to dominates the mental ability of these children. And to control people’s mental ability is to control their self-definition in relationship to others. And in order to do this successfully, it has to be done from an early age (Wa Thiong’o, 1985). What the colonizer succeeded in doing, therefore, was destroying or undervaluing the ways of knowing and teaching of not only the African people but of all the Indigenous peoples of the world.

The use of a foreign language as a medium of education makes a child foreign within her or his own culture, environment, etc. This creates a colonial alienation. What is worse, the neo-colonized subject is made to see the world as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition. The damage is further amplified when the neo-colonized subject is exposed to images of her or his world mirrored in the written language of her or his colonizer, where the natives’ language, culture, history, or people are associated with low status, slow intelligence, and barbarism. James Baldwin expressed the depth of internalization when he talked about the difficulty of dismantling internalized values or norms. When we consider the human consequences of colonial education and the devastating impact that it can be expected to have on those who do not fit the Eurocentric norm, the urgency to create room for Indigenous ways of knowing and teaching is clearly evident. Employing an anti-colonial education could do this.

### **The role of Indigenous knowledge**

As I have argued throughout this paper, education and theorizing do not take place in a vacuum. Academic practices take place within the context of a history of colonialism, imperialism, and neo-colonial, post-colonial and anti-colonial conditionalities. I maintain that Eurocentric discourses serve the purpose of justifying the neo-colonial agenda. And as a scholar, I have to constantly ask myself, how do I disrupt this agenda in a constructive and meaningful way? In the last six years of my teaching, I have created graduate courses that place students’ Indigenous knowledges at the centre of their learning. My *cultural knowledges, representation and colonial education* and *spirituality and schooling: sociological implications* courses provide space for students to rethink the dislodging of their cultural roots by colonial education. At the beginning of the semester, many students state that they are Canadians and have no connections to Indigenous knowledges or Indigenous peoples. However, I encourage them to go back to their families and ask them about their lineage, their ancestral roots and their various ethnicities. The outcome of this exercise has been the unsettling of hegemonic thinking and the beginning of many journeys like my own. The spaces created in these courses have been a place where converging stories of cultural knowledges are told—where students’ ancestral roots are acknowledged, and

reclaimed. This is but one source of confirmation that Indigenous knowledges can, indeed, be incorporated in Euro–Canadian curriculums in ways which speak to individuals searching for their roots.

## Discussion

The experience of colonization and the challenges of the post-colonial world have produced an explosion of powerful new writing in cultures as diverse as India, Australia, the West Indies, Africa and North America. These writings open debates about the interrelationships of colonial and neo-colonial education and Indigenous knowledges. While some authors ignore and disparage Indigenous ways of knowing, others continue to conserve these knowledges, thus creating a push–pull factor that has led to a lack of appropriate support for the maintenance of these knowledges. With formal education and its inherent rewards, Indigenous knowledges have been devalued in the minds and hearts of Indigenous people, despite the fact that Indigenous knowledge systems predate colonialism (Wane, 2002). As indicated earlier, my formal education has ironically drawn me closer to my Indigeneity through research, causing me to become increasingly self-reflexive in an effort to move beyond critiquing the other. As an author, therefore, I believe that there is a need to move beyond attempts to de-centre objectification of the Other. It is imperative that I stop spending my time critiquing the totalizing forms of western historicism and engage in the discourse of possibility, where the missing voices and knowledges can be heard and validated.

To be Indigenous is problematic. In today’s globalization era, rural African Indigenous women who continue to subsist (or attempt to subsist) off the land, experience forms of colonization and oppression through education and development systems. From the western philosophical gaze, their daily activities remain static, archaic, and irrelevant at best. This view believes that only formal education can provide the necessary vehicles, such as literacy training or job skills, urbanization or technological advances, away from the restraints of backwardness and poverty. It has been argued that formal education provides opportunities to be free of primitive ways and to embrace the fast moving twenty-first century technological advancement. Such a position, which frames technological advancement as the sole means for improving one’s situation, reflects a narcissistic view which devalues all ways of being in the world that are not consistent with the view being promoted by post-industrial world powers.

Feiring (2000) advances that the construction of Indigeneity remains a ‘fundamental negation of the western self-construction’ (p. 29) that takes on different meaning at international, national, or local levels. Within international arenas, Indigeneity refers to European or American myths or images detached from social realities, whereas at the local level, the discourses of Indigenous peoples remain disempowered and detached from political processes. Notably, Feiring suggests that the relationship of Indigenous movements within current educational discourse becomes dependent on external expectations, such that ‘being Indigenous implies both rights and duties—the first and foremost duty to fulfill western expectations as to the identity of being Indigenous’ (2000, p. 30).

These arguments acknowledge the role of the educational system in producing and reproducing racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, gender, sexual, and class-based inequalities in society. Further, anti-colonial discourse problematizes the marginalization of certain voices and ideas in the educational system, as well as the delegitimation, in the pedagogic and communicative practices of schools, of the knowledge and experiences of subordinate groups. Using the anti-colonial discursive approach means affirming the pedagogic need to

confront the challenge of social diversity and the urgency for creating an educational system that is both more inclusive and better able to respond to the varied multiple knowledges that students bring to the formal learning spaces. As Dei (2000) has written, our educational system should reflect the fact that knowledge is not uncentric but multicentric and as such there is a need to create multiple centers of learning.

## **Conclusion**

From the foregoing discussion it becomes clear that knowledge should not be owned or controlled. Rather, there should be avenues in which knowledge can reinvent and exhibit itself in various forms. As such, this discussion is not a static one, but one that evolves over time and space. It is a knowledge that evolves in relation to the needs of a specific group that responds to the context of the local input. As currently structured, our Eurocentric national educational policies neglect and devalue Indigenous knowledges. An inclusive education would encourage creative, Indigenous ways of knowing, teaching and learning to flourish via curriculum and language adapted for each Indigenous community created and sustained by its members.

Creating space for discussion will lead to further questions and more engagement with scholars on issues of colonial education and its outcome and the role of Indigenous knowledge in knowledge construction, visual and participatory videos, virtual learning, etc. Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing and teaching are complex, fluid, and heterogeneous in nature. Salvaging the languages and knowledges of Indigenous cultures has become the priority of many Indigenous peoples—not just to avoid extinction or archive that which is doomed to be lost but to rejuvenate what remains to sustain a diverse world. From the western gaze, the Indigenous identity is one of romance and fear. There is awe and admiration for a lifestyle no longer possible for most; at the same time, there is fear that subsistence and simplicity threaten modern wasteful, expensive ways of life. With formal education and its reputed rewards, Indigenous knowledges have been devalued in the minds and hearts of Indigenous peoples, despite the fact that Indigenous knowledge systems predate colonialism and contribute, in many instances, to sustainability (Wane, 2002). Unfortunately, and sometimes with disastrous effects, Indigenous peoples often view the knowledges they inherit and construct as unworthy of recognition or value. Current western approaches do not acknowledge the richness of different approaches, instead choosing to perpetuate the homogeneity resultant from the dominance of the developed world. However, we can no longer justify the ongoing oppression of nations of people. The current system of education alienates many from their cultural traditions and as such, is often perceived as a dehumanizing process. Education may actually benefit from the sustainable practices inherent in Indigenous systems of knowledge.

## **Notes**

1. Ogun-dipe-Leslie's 'six Mountains on an African woman's back are: one is oppression from outside [colonialism and neo-colonialism], the second is from traditional structures, feudal, slave-based, communal etc, the third is her backwardness [neo-colonialism]; the fourth is man; the fifth is her color, her race; and the sixth is herself' (1994, p. 28). She goes on to expound on the fact that the six mountains signified the 500 years of assault, battery and mastery of various kinds dating back to the fourteenth century with the arrival of Vasco da Gama. This is compounded by structures, attitudes inherited from Indigenous history, and sociological realities. The traditional past is mostly signified by physical control of a woman's body and its products.
2. For more debates on African feminism, refer to Clenora Hudson-Weems (1997), Aiwa Thiam (1986), Amina Mama (1998), Carlene Dei (1997), Lisa M. Glazer (1997) and Eryn Scott (1995).



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