Ancestor Worship, Just Who is Worshipping Whom?: Theoretical and Methodological Reflections on Power and Knowledge about Africa.

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the
University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT

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Master of Arts
2001

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This thesis reflects on conceptual, theoretical and methodological issues pertaining to the study of African knowledge systems, with a particular focus on Spirit mediumship in Zimbabwe. Utilizing various texts of historiography and ethnography, the study reflects on the following issues: (a) power and the knowledge production processes; (b) what is history in Africa and who defines it?; (c) the rituals of literature reviews and the ordering of (African) knowledge in academia; and, (d) gender, language and research methodology as technologies of power in African history. Key arguments are: (i) studying African phenomena, like Spirit mediumship and Ancestor worship using Western paradigms and languages is itself a form of Western Spirit possession and Ancestor worship; (ii) theoretical and Western language choices exclude the vast majority of continental African people from meaningfully engaging in and contributing to historical knowledge production; and, (iii) the challenge of demystifying and de-colonizing academic knowledge theories and methodologies used in the study of Africa.
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Preface

This thesis is an extraction from a larger on-going research project on African intellectual history, with a focus on Zimbabwe, and the nineteenth century figure of Mbuya Nehanda in particular. Nehanda is a strong figure in the history of Zimbabwe and the only such celebrated female figure in the nation's collective memory. My original (and on-going) plan was to write a biography of Mbuya Nehanda. However, as I read deeper into the Spirit possession and mediumship literature, I had a strong hunch that I needed to do a critical reexamination of the conceptual, theoretical and methodological tools that produced the literature.

One of the (not so) surprising finds was the intellectually tickling reality that Spirit possession and Spirit mediumship is just as much a modern (and I dare add postmodern) phenomenon as it is said to be an ancient African religious form. Here I am not talking about clairvoyants in the West as equivalents, but of scholastic Ancestor worship, Spirit possession and mediumship that goes on in academia in the name of producing knowledge in the long tradition of many learned (mostly white) men and recently some women. By this I mean the utility of conceptual, theoretical and methodological frameworks forged by these venerable Western scholars in disciplines like anthropology and still considered classic tools of research in the study of Africa to date. I also mean the use of postmodern frameworks

* Views expressed in this thesis are my sole responsibility.
(though not discussed in this thesis) which in some cases are reformed
modes of enlightened and modernist thinking to analyze Africa. The explicit
and implicit argument in this thesis is that African theoretical and
methodological frameworks have not been sought to explain African realities
in the knowledge industry. This, I argue, contributes to a deeper knowledge
chasm between Africa and other regions of the world. Africa continues to be
a literal and metaphoric minefield that anyone (with money and resources)
can go to and dig up intellectual and material resources to take back to the
Western metropolises for Western (knowledge) development.

The growing gap in knowledge (however defined) between Africa and much of
the world, I maintain, is also exacerbated by the continued use of colonial
languages like English in producing intellectual work. In spaces like Africa
where the vast majority of people consider English, for example, as a
functional language, a language of business and class mobility, it is difficult
to envision active intellectual activity where more than the book-learned can
critically and meaningfully participate and contribute. The intellectual
activity in much of Africa has to move from being case study material for
Western paradigms. Unless this changes, it will be close to impossible for
Africa to drag itself out of the dependency mud it is stuck in. My key
suggestion is that scholars, particularly historians, have to take an active
role in recovering Africa’s intellectual history, among many, for Africa’s sake
– and perhaps for humanity’s sake.
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Chapter 1: History, Power and Knowledge: An Introduction

1.0 General Introduction

I shall begin this thesis with a rendition of a childhood tale I remember. I use this particular tale, because it struck me as I sought for answers and ways to articulate my ideas about the meaning of history – the theory and practice of writing history. According to the story:

There was once a group of children, all blind (we shall call them humans), who had a first encounter with an elephant. After this experience, each was eager to give their version of what the elephant was like.

“Well, I now know that the elephant is a wide banana-leaf-like animal,” offered one who had encountered the ear.

“Oh, come now, I really think it is a long flexible-tube-like animal, mighty powerful, too” countered the one who had swung on the elephant’s trunk.

“You folks don’t know what you are talking about,” pitched another in a booming voice. “The animal is one hell of a powerful, small nothing. Can you imagine it is this small lank rope that sits on two boulders, and even

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1 This thesis is part of an on-going larger doctoral dissertation project. Some of the ideas explored here have since found their way into a essay that has been accepted for publication, titled “Mapfupa Angu Achamuka – My Bones Shall Rise: The Intellectual Legacy of Mbuya Nehanda of Zimbabwe”, in Journal of Postcolonial Studies in Education (forthcoming, 2001). I thank the editors and reviewers and some friends for their sharp critiques that sharpened my own ideas and critiques on Spirit medium historiography in Zimbabwe and Africa.

2 Please note that because the ChiShona language that I am translating this story from has no gender specific pronouns. I have avoided imposing them because the story would become masculine. Also, I consider translation an art, and I am yet to master it.
commands hot stuff to shoot out of a gully when it (the rope) stands? Now, is power!” the person bragged.

“Well, I beg to differ on that one; I think the animal is wide as a baobab tree, wonder how it gets itself around, must have deep roots in old age,” offered the one who had experienced the elephant its feet.

The debate over the “true” likeness of the elephant, with such varied renditions, quickly got heated. After a while, a few people in the group suggested

“Why don’t we put our pieces together, because, perhaps, just perhaps, we might get the complete picture.” A few thought it an excellent idea, but some demurred, arguing that the part they had experienced was the most important, and it would therefore be imperative, if they were to participate, that the group piece the elephant together from their vantage points.

“Because it is obviously the most important” they offered. The most vocal of these was the one had experienced the rear end, and had been pelted by some “hot stuff” and seemed determined to make good of a bad play. So eloquent and convincing was this person’s argument that most began to agree and even believe that indeed the tail was the most important part of and on the elephant.
Just when it had become doctrine that in order to describe the real picture of the elephant, one had to start from the tail going out, a group of hunters (we shall call them extraterrestrials) came by.

"My oh my," extraterrestrial exclaimed, "what a magnificent a breed of animal this is! Look at its tusks, and that head would be a fine trophy for any hunter worth its title."

"And this particular species has a fine long memory, I have heard my people say," another offered.

"Really? Well, we should leave it to procreate instead of taking it home in pieces, it might be the only one still alive for all we know," some suggested. Thus instead of killing the elephant, they left the animal to propagate.

During the extraterrestrial conversation, quite a few humans happened to be within earshot. One such was the most silent of them, one of the few who had suspected that the notion of the tail (or any part for that matter) was the most important part was a little farfetched, but was too timid to say it. The tail bearer on the other hand, also heard the talk, and afraid that the extraterrestrial portrait of the elephant (which included unencountered parts) would puncture the tail doctrine, began another campaign to convince the group that the tail was still the center.

"Despite wild rumors circulating rumors" came the insecure roar, "that any part of the elephant can be the center or starting point of defining the elephant, the tail is still THE spot! You can call it what you will, but the
rear still rules." Thus began a long, sometimes bloody, scramble for the power to define and name the elephant, and that is why humans continue to hunt the elephant to this day.

This might be a little story to quiet fretting children, as we were then, but I find it appropriate a story at the beginning of this thesis because it illustrates that history – as past events and written documents – is a complex and fascinating reality. The story also speaks to the reality that history, like the elephant, cannot speak for itself as it were, and is thus subject to corruption by those with the power to define what they want others to believe it is. I use this story, also, to highlight the reality that historical knowledge about Africa remains an academic exercise, one that is exclusive and exclusionary because of the language(s) and location(s) of this written history – mostly colonial languages – that render those without the qualifications silent onlookers of their own lives described.

Western and/or Eurocentric\(^3\) (male) intellectual culture set standards for what counts as historical knowledge in much of the world, and Africa is no exception. One case in point is the study of Spirit mediumship in a place like Zimbabwe, where a dominant paradigm about what it is has solidified, making it difficult to think of it in other ways, including, and

\(^3\) I utilize Western and Eurocentric frameworks interchangeably in this thesis. However, this does not necessarily mean a racial divide that all white people read reality one way, and all black, brown, red, ... people read it another. By Eurocentric lenses, I am particularly referring to interpretations that impose a
especially by Africans our/themselves. It, however, does not make it impossible to question how this knowledge has been created, produced and disseminated, and why white/European (male) interests have defined knowledge production in this area – thus making the elephant’s tail or ear pass for the “whole” elephant. What is glaringly absent from most if not all of the research in this field, is that Spirit mediumship in Zimbabwe is conceptualized and theorized from western perspectives. It, I will hasten to add, does not make these frameworks invalid, because there are different vantage points from which to view the elephant. What is disturbing is that Euro-American perspectives have shaped the field in ways that almost make it impervious for those seeking to define the field from African perspectives.

African theoretical frameworks have as yet not been utilized in the deeper and broader understanding of Spirit mediumship as a central theme. Thus far, research has relentlessly focused on it (Spirit mediumship) as a form of resistance to imperialism and colonialism. This dominant paradigm has deprived Africans in particular of the ability to think of social institutions like Spirit mediumship as important institutions in African societies beyond the political, economic and military history defined by western scholars. Conceptualizing and theorizing Spirit mediumship in predominantly resistance language, that is, military and

meaning to an experience that has a totally different social register. For a very useful definition of
political history, has led to an assumption (even and maybe especially by Africans) that Africans prior to colonialism were without a vibrant intellectual life, and therefore had no such history to study. My larger research project (for my doctorate) seeks to broaden the discourse to include various facets of this obviously key institution in African society so we can get a picture closer to reality of what the elephant is like. My search is for an intellectual history that I think lies forgotten in the rubble of resistance history that currently dominates the field.

What do I mean by intellectual history, and who is an intellectual? I define intellectual history as the history of ideas that past generations had and generated as part of their lived experiences – in this instance, ideas about history, and the ancestral voice. I do not conceptualize ideas as the lofty, head in the clouds or ivory towerish activity so germane to contemporary academic life, but more as an active engagement in the business of searching for the past, living in the present and seeking to preserve the future. My notion of intellectual history is that it is a history of ideas, ideas that are

...most certainly part of history, part of the attempt to understand past human experience. [Intellectual history's] role ... is the understanding of those ideas, thoughts, arguments, beliefs, assumptions, attitudes and preoccupations that together made up the intellectual or reflective life of previous societies. This intellectual life was, of course, continuous with, and not rigidly...
separable from, the political life, the economic life, of the same societies.⁴

An "intellectual" in the history I am searching for, therefore, is one that spent a significant part of her/his life involved in the search for ideas, generated them and developed them, thereby participated in the shaping of her or his society. To borrow from David Hollinger;

An 'intellectual' ... is one who, whatever else he or she may have done in life, made thinking enough of an enterprise to get himself or herself into the tracings that remain of that particular human activity as carried out during his or her own time.⁵

Now, in the study of Africa and Spirit mediumship in particular, a problem arises because Africans – particularly on the continent – are generally not associated with generating ideas worth studying. This, therefore, makes the discussion of an African intellectual history a rather precarious one. But such ill informed assumptions should be challenged, and in this piece of work you are about to read, I seek to trace why there has a shying away from perspectives other than resistance politics on Spirit mediumship in Zimbabwe. Through this thesis, I also seek to understand the definition and meaning of history (particularly historiography) and the technologies (I use the term broadly) that have developed the knowledge we have on African/Zimbabwean Spirit mediumship to date. Because, I believe, it is in the power and

those with the power to define what counts as history (worth writing),
that we have the current history on Spirit mediumship in Zimbabwe.

1.1 Thesis Overview

I do not claim an extensive and wide sweeping analysis of the area of
Spirit mediumship in Africa in this thesis, rather, my interest and focus
here is on the power and processes of defining historical knowledge. This
I do as my way of thinking through ideas and ways of reconfiguring an
African history that does not fall into the already predefined groves but
seeks to find its place in the maze of knowledge production. This search
led me to a case study presentation of my ideas in an effort to explore, in
some depth, some of the issues I am grappling with. Thus, this
introductory chapter sets out the parameters of my study and gives the
reader a sense of my interest in the topic and choice of focus areas in
each chapter. The second chapter is a case study in the search for
answers to some the key question, what is history? This chapter
evaluates the definition and meaning of history using the now classic
historiography text of Edward H. Carr; critically evaluating Carr’s
conceptualization and theorizing of what is history and searching for
Africa in this “classic” definition and meaning of history.

5 David A. Holinger, “What is Intellectual History ...?” in Juliet Gardiner, ed., What is History Today?
The third chapter critically, albeit summatively, discusses the politics of manufacturing consent through literature reviews in processes of producing knowledge about Africa. Using two widely read research studies written to date on Spirit-mediumship on Zimbabwe, I appraise the conceptual and theoretical frameworks utilized in these research studies in a bid to understand why there has been such an interest in Spirit mediumship in Africa by Western scholars. The third case study, while different in thrust, brings to attention the dangers of waiting for Westerners to define what history is worth writing about in Africa, because by so doing, these scholars retain the power to define what is history, and when this history becomes worth writing. This rather unconventional literature review is set to this pitch to protest the Western tradition and ritual of reviewing literature where what counts for literature by its very definition discounts other forms of literature and knowing in the process. In this chapter, what is of particular interest to me is the question, what is ancestor-worship, and just who is worshiping whom? – since Spirit mediumship is about honoring Ancestral voices. More than go into a detailed chapter, line and verse discussion of the highlighted studies – which I do in my larger project – I have chosen to focus on the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of the said studies. I ask, is what is passing for knowledge on Africa intended to “empower” Africans and Africa’s ownership of her historical

knowledge, or is it actually intelligence information serving (yet again) the needs of West? Also, are Africans the only people that engage in "superstitious ancestor worship," or are Western and westernized scholars disguising their/our (Western) ancestor worshipping with clever/sophisticated language and elaborate (a.k.a. rigorous) rituals called scholarly research but essentially performing the same rituals as the "peasants" we are studying? My aim here is to illustrate that, in fact, those that claim that Africans engage in ancestor worship and ritual actually engage in similar practices themselves, (understandably?) paying homage to their Western scholastic ancestors and traditions in their studies of Africa – though not named as such. The difference, I argue, is in the technology and power of language and in research methodologies – rituals so performed – in the business of academic ancestor worshipping. For in order to be a scholar of repute, one has to genuflect at one or several key altars in deep devotion to those that paved the way – the ancestors – else one runs the risk of one's scholarship being labeled "weak" or worse still "not theoretical enough."

Chapter four amplifies the assertions made in the preceding chapter, taking a closer look at the importance of language to the processes of producing historical knowledge in and on Africa. This chapter also engages the importance of research methodologies, arguing that research methods almost predetermine the kind of knowledge produced – as the
saying goes, can’t get orange juice out of a pineapple. Using some key terms and concepts central to the study of Spirit-mediumship, I argue that one of the biggest problems that hinders the development of a vibrant intellectual activity by a wider population on the subject matter in Africa is embedded in the “official” language of research – the English language. The English language as the medium of producing knowledge is often taken for granted particularly the fact that it is a language (and culture) that is benefiting immensely at the expense of African languages and cultures. The aim is to understand that (more often than not) words that mean something in one language can sometimes be mistranslated to mean something that either does or does not happen in another culture. Important to the argument is the question, what happens to meaning when words from one (dominating) language are used to describe realities happening in another (subservient one)?

Research methodologies, it is my assertion, are key to the generation and production of knowledge, and this has to begin to take center stage in the pursuit of African historiography. Because of the thoroughly corrupt manner in which anthropological and historical knowledge on Spirit-mediumship in Africa was first obtained and modified over the decades, research methodologies, where Africa is concerned, have to be re-

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9 I use the English language and British culture as the colonial example throughout this thesis because of the Zimbabwean experiences shared here. For Zimbabwe, though tainted and touched by other European colonial relations, was largely shaped by British colonialisity and culture.
examined. The argument is based on the belief that research methodologies for Africa should suit the African socio-cultural and intellectual landscape so that knowledge production does not continue to be a lofty exercise that most people cannot be nourished by or contribute to in more meaningful ways. For if knowledge is to be a source of power for Africa in the next generation of knowledge based economies, it is important that research methodologies and the utilization of Indigenous languages transform how the business of writing history is done in and about Africa. After all, knowledge was and still is a source of power for any society in the world, and power sharing – so called democracy – begins with the fundamental right to the power to define one's self, one's history and knowledge of that history. As more (of us) Africans participate in the knowledge production industry, issues of language, not as a mere medium of communication, become crucial. Critical questions that deserve to be faced honestly include: who are and should be our audience when we go out to research about our past and therefore ourselves?

Overall, therefore, my suggestions in this thesis are meant to be evocative, aimed at inviting debate on issues of power in the knowledge production enterprise, on and about Africa. It is an argument that, I believe, contributes to the importance of reclaiming Indigenous
knowledge systems for Africa (an indeed humanity), with the main aim of extricating African Ancestors and Ancestral knowledge from the claws of external and internal colonizing scholarship. My purpose in this thesis is, therefore, to re-member the dis-membered, for re-membering is critical in resisting the insidious and seductive nature of Western culture and education that still subtly insists on being THE “universal” way of knowing and producing knowledge.

1.2 Locating the Historian in the Writing of History.

Since I shall be discussing the importance and dynamics of intellectual heritage in this study, it is fitting that I give a brief overview of my own (intellectual) history, and how I come to be interested in the topic of Spirit mediumship. This is not meant to be a memoir by any stretch of the imagination, but meant to be an anecdote that contextualizes this study. So no high hopes for a scoop on how I became a shaman, because I am not one – at least yet.

I come to the study of Spirit-mediumship via a very unexpected route, dreams. While I was pursuing a Master’s degree in International Development Studies (IDS), I had the unexpected turn of events when

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one persistent dream changed the course of my thesis writing—
essentially changed my intellectual pilgrimage. During my coursework,
I wrote a thesis proposal based on a combination of intense and
extensive readings of the literature in the field and on personal
reflection(s) on the deeming nature of international development
discourse as it pertained to the representation of African women. My
basic hypothesis was that Western and Eurocentric development theory,
policy and practice constructed African women folk as dis-empowered,
 oppressed, illiterate and a to-be-pitied lot. The suggestions (from much
of the discourse) were—and still are—that (mainly rural) African women,
in order to be “developed,” should emulate their Western and/or
westernized counterparts who were “liberated” and “empowered”.
Ironically, embedded in theory, policy and practice of international
development was (and is) an implicit need to keep the “dis-empowered” in
their place to maintain the better-than-thou reality alive. Given this
background, I proposed to research even deeper just how founded these
assumptions were and hoped to demonstrate that African women had
agency, but that it was different from that of their Western/westernized
counterparts. Using a case study of Zimbabwe over roughly a hundred
years, from the 1800s through to the 1990s, I hoped to demonstrate that
agency was in the eyes of the beholder. And I, like so many before me,

had intended to utilize the figure of Mbuya Nehanda as an exemplar of
the kinds of spaces that existed for (VaShona) African women before
settler colonialism.

Details of the process of how my topic shifted are documented in that
thesis; suffice to say, Mbuya Nehanda unexpectedly became the central
theme and figure of that thesis. At the time, I made the decision – a deal
would be a better expression – that I would give Mbuya Nehanda my full
attention during my doctoral studies when I would have the resources to
carry out intense and extensive research on her – essentially write a
biography. Now the last two years since that MA thesis has been a battle
of the mind. My thoroughly brainwashing westernized and now western
education/schooling has been pulling tags and poking holes at the my
literal dream come true, and it has been very fascinating and painful to
experience to listen to myself and my “research subject.” After trying all
sorts of things to avoid writing about Mbuya Nehanda, telling myself it
was but dreams, I had a repeat of the experience and decided, enough.
So I again made a deal with her – if you are for real and truly want me to
do this project, look for the place, money and resources to do this
project, I will give my all if you so demonstrate your presence. I have
been in shock since, for besides getting a most supportive mentor to

8 Ruramisai Charumbira. Rooted and Winged. Keeping Traditions without Being Traditional: Zimbabwean
Women’s Ancestral, Historical and Contemporary Agency in Afrocentric Development. (Halifax, 1999),
MA thesis.
work with at the University of Toronto – Professor David Levine – who affirmed my search for resources and a more suitable home for my project, every fellowship I applied for came back positive. Also, my project found a new home and I have no choice but to make it the best it can be as I cannot whine (to Nehanda) that I do not have resources to do her – and especially the nameless (mostly female) Ancestors – justice, reclaiming them for posterity. In a nutshell, this is the story of my journey into deeply questioning the meaning and definition of history, evaluating the tradition and ritual of literature reviews and asserting that language and research methodologies need to be overhauled so as to be inclusive.
Chapter 2: What is History?: Reflections on a Classic Text

"Of all our studies, history is best qualified to reward our research"
Malcolm X.

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I evaluate the meaning(s) of historiography – the theory and practice of history – as it pertains to Africa by analyzing the "classic" historiography text by Edward H. Carr. Carr's book illustrates the contradictions and power embedded in the definition, meaning and production of historical knowledge. The issue of power in the processes of producing historical knowledge is particularly interesting to me because it is rarely addressed in the study of African history both on the continent and elsewhere. In this chapter, I follow some of Carr's key arguments – as I perceive them – fleshing them out, in an effort to understand the definition and meaning of history for my own piece of work. To this end, it is important to read my critique of Carr's work (and other historical works considered herein) with a consciousness that I, like Carr and other scholars, am a product of my own history. I struggle with colonial, patriarchal and white supremacist legacies, among other

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1 Edward Hallet Carr, What is History? (New York: Vintage Books, 1962). Unless specified, all citations of Carr are from the same publication. I therefore quote only his name and page number on subsequent citations in this chapter (and thesis). Another very important issue to note is that I use the pronouns he and his throughout this chapter in keeping with Carr's articulation of the subject matter in his era. A gender analysis is rendered in the chapter.
positive and challenging realities, which have shaped my educational experience thus far. Thus I claim a subjective objectivity in this analysis.

2.1 History and the Historian as Social Construct and Product

[Our] ...answer to the question, What is History?, ...consciously or unconsciously, reflects our own position in time, and forms part of our answer to the broader question of what view we take of the society in which live.²

Thus began Carr in his classic text on the study of history. He emphasized the importance of studying the historian – who was incidentally (white and) male – as a crucial starting point in understanding the historical knowledge the historian produces because,

You cannot fully appreciate the work of the historian unless you have first grasped the standpoint from which he himself approached it; secondly, that standpoint is itself rooted in a social and historical background. [A]s Marx once said, the educator himself has been educated; in modern jargon, the brain of the brain-washer has itself been washed. The historian, before he begins to write history, is the product of history.³

This insistence on the importance of knowing and understanding the historian’s background was based on the notion that an historian is a social being located in a particular time and space in history, realities that train and shape him (sic) in his interpretation of social reality. This, however, does not translate to a robotic being, for the historian retains agency and adjusts himself as times change. The only constant,

² Carr, p. 2.
³ Carr, p. 20
perhaps, is that the historian’s agency is within the social parameters of his lived reality – be he radical or conservative. This socialized interpretation by and large filters through the historian’s work as he reconstructs historical events and has, therefore, to highly consider making sense of the history he writes.4 Understanding the historian’s historical baggage sheds light on why he brings particular understandings and interpretations to the study of history; it facilitates our understanding of the fallacy of an objective historiography, because objectivity, like subjectivity, has its limits and limitations. Thus the historian is subjective in his assumed objectivity, because “...by and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants, [because] history is interpretation.”5

To explore the foregoing statement, let us consider the fact that Carr’s book was constructed from lectures delivered at the University of Cambridge, England, from January to March 1961. At the time of his lectures, even though women in England had gained the right to vote and had access to education within Cambridge, Oxford and other English public spaces, sexist (masculinized) language was the assumed universal.6 By utilizing sexist language, Carr’s writing reflects the (historically) gendered nature of the English language and culture of

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4 This statement also important for the understanding of literature discussed in chapter three.
5 Carr, p. 18.
which he was a product. He could not rid himself of it because he could not have foreseen a future that would question his transparently sexist use of language.

This reality draws the reader's attention to the fact that even though Carr could luminously illustrate, analyze and highlight the importance of studying the historian before studying the history he produced, he could not extricate himself from his own history. By referring to the historian as a he, Carr conformed to the socio-linguistic standards of his time. This masculinist writing, as feminist scholars have argued, even though assumed to be a "neutral" term, is not "neutral," because such writing inscribes masculinist, racist and classist values into historical knowledge— a reality that has undergone much needed redress in the last three decades.

Carr, thus, took positivist historians to task for insisting on "objective" historical facts, "objective" evidence, and therefore historical "truth" yet did not question the sexism embedded in the language that he used in arguing his case. He did not interrogate his own understanding and interpretation of history, which he filtered through the eyes of a white,

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7 For a sharp critique on the gendered nature of the English language, see especially. Oyeronke Oyewumi, The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
upper middleclass male teaching at a prestigious university in England. This then fogs some of his arguments as the reader wonders if the history he is theorizing, is one that comes from what is perceived from his social location. In short, Carr did not pass his own test; and one wonders what Mrs. Carr – if there was one – thought about such historiographical reflections that gave sharp analysis on one issue while casting a long shadow on others.

2.2 History as a Contested Terrain

As argued in the foregoing section, Carr contended that because the historian is a product of his own society he reflects a particular standpoint(s) in a given society. However this standpoint, even though "projected" as "objective" and "neutral, it is contestable because ultimately, "the historian is necessarily selective." The historian's selectivity in interpretation means that his work should be rigorously interrogated in order to understand the perspectives he brings to the debate and why he draws the conclusion that he does. To this end, the historian interacting with historical facts has to engage historical data and materials with the same "doubting Thomas" attitude that other historians and consumers of the knowledge should employ when reading the particular historian's work.

8 Deborah K. King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist" In
Thus the historian, according to Carr, has to read extensively in the field of his interest(s) in order to not only to be aware of the debates, but also to understand the complexities and competing voices and discourses in that area of research. And not only has the historian to read widely in his field, he has to read between the lines and the fine print of every textual, visual and oral (re)presentation of historical data as all of it comes through a selective process of ordering knowledge. This, Carr argued, is important because the manner in which someone interprets a particular historical period event is not necessarily cast in stone nor is it gospel truth. Everything and everyone is subject to interrogation and contestation, open to re-interpretation, because history is a contested socio-political and a contested intellectual terrain. An astute historian will uphold the discipline by acknowledging his own fallibility as a human interpreter of historical events and figures.

While Carr's foregoing powerful argument is a vital part of any intellectual and professional historian's work and life, one has also to question the possible paralyzing and negative impact the contestation of history can have on once colonized peoples and oppressed groups. Those seeking to reclaim and write their own histories – like Africans – find themselves up against the wall of limited "standard" historical literature.

Africa has and continues to rely on the writings of Western scholars, some passionate, others sympathetic and others indifferent, and this limits the extent the debate can lead to an ownership of the knowledge production processes by the continent.

Also, Carr's assertion that one has to read extensively into one's field, does not consider that in places like Africa where reading is limited to an exclusive few, the literature that defines the field of history is inevitably written in a foreign language and system. Because of the definition of literature, the methods of reviewing it, and the overall ordering of historical knowledge, the powerless are erased or barred from producing "standard" history texts, only historical material for the book learned is available. This doctrine taught in colonial schools has led to an obsession with the "superiority" of the written text over others forms of representing knowledge. In politically independent Africa, it has meant a prioritization of Western forms of producing knowledge (in colonial/European languages) over African forms.10

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9 Also, as I argue in the next chapter, reading widely – performing the literature review ritual – while very essential is also very problematic as only certain forms of “literature” lend themselves to this method of assessing the state of knowledge in the field. What Carr did not envision nor include – coming from a writing obsessed culture – is the importance of other forms of literature that cannot be read in the literal sense of the word. Jan Vansina’s (also) classic texts do a fine job in redefining history outside the writing obsessed culture. See, Jan Vansina, Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1965); Oral Tradition as History (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

For instance, the first generation of (mostly male) African scholars wrote histories that reinforced colonial (and introduced) gender stereotypes.\textsuperscript{11} This has spilt over into a gendering of African languages like ChiShona, which is inherently non-gender specific in its configuration. The English translation of ChiShona lore and wisdom by Hamütyinei, Mordikai A., and B. Plangger is a prime example. This wonderful collection is marred by English translations that encode gendered nouns onto non-gender specific ChiShona proverbs, masculinizing the translation.\textsuperscript{12} To my mind, the writing of tradition as history in Africa by Africans has to change the way academic knowledge is produced. Africans have to strive to search for the intellectual history of Africa that goes beyond colonial by products of intellectual activities to searching for the roots of what used to be their societies and building on it for contemporary realities – after all, every culture does it. One such historical heritage in African reality is that of Spirit mediumship, an area that has fascinated many (big and small name) Western scholars – but for very different reasons.

\textsuperscript{11} Oyeronke Oyewumi, \textit{The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1997).

2.3 *History as the Past Interpreted through Contemporary Eyes*

Closely related to the foregoing points, discussion of the importance of the historian's interaction with "literature" in his area of research interest(s), is the reality that history is the past interpreted through contemporary lenses; history is yesterday's reality as seen through today's eyes. History, Carr (1962) argued, even though primarily considered the study of the past, is the study of the past as understood through contemporary perspectives. In conventional academic tradition, the historian employs "tried and tested" research methodologies and language(s) to make an historical argument. He then shares this knowledge with the wider scholastic community and other interested parties through customary channels and a common "understood" language. This participation in the traditions and rituals of producing academic knowledge is one that each generation of scholars learns reinvents, re-interprets and re-constructs as it builds knowledge, based on its own lived realities and new findings. The (Western constructed) historical database is recreated and expanded with and by each generation of scholars who, through new findings, expand and supplement it to allow for an even greater understanding of historical realities – usually as per established theoretical frameworks.
Because of historians' interests, and the power of funding in the research process, some areas of research get obscured while others are trafficked with stifling frequency. As this happens, historical memory and amnesia necessarily set in as historians – as products of history – participate in the processes of selecting what societies choose to remember about their pasts and what to forget. On some occasions (though far between) historians might stir the collective memory by researching areas society has forgotten, wants to forget, or to which it is indifferent.13

However, in many an African context (like Zimbabwe) historiography has been and continues to be dominated by Western driven topics. Consequently, there is no space for mediocre (historical) scholarship for those African scholars interested in a contextualized historical and contemporary knowledge in and about Africa. Knowledge about the past has to stir the society into a dialogue with its past, and essentially with itself in order to move forward. For a societal dialogue with the past inevitably leads to an involvement with the past through contemporary activities ranging from participation in cutting edge cultural productions to intense debates about current affairs – leaving no room for mediocrity

across the social strata. This kind of scholarship presents an opening of contemporary spaces in which history – as past events – is not an archaic, dead and static form of knowledge, but an alive and dynamic process in constant interaction with the present – challenging, affirming and contradictory. This sort of three/multi-dimensional relationship is embedded in African reality and spirituality like that found among VaShona, where the past/ancestors – Vadzimu – and the living constantly interact in a process that keeps the past, present and future alive – each dependent on the other for its very existence. For the (African) historian to maximize his active involvement in this process he has to dig through the rubbles of contemporary popular culture into the past to bring new historical insights. History, is and should be "... a continuous process of interaction between the historian and [her/] his facts, an unending dialogue between the past and the present," Carr exhorted.14

2.4 Power, Accountability and Historical Knowledge

In the foregoing section, Carr asserted that history is the past as seen through contemporary eyes. I amplified and differed from this assertion


14 Carr, p. 24. It worth highlighting here that that Carr's historian is one that is constantly working alone, reading, interpreting and producing in solitude. This sets a contradiction in African societies like VaShona in which history is considered a process produced and maintained by the past, the ancestors, the present, those living, and the future, those yet to come.
and highlight that in African societies, like among VaShona, history is not a dead past awaiting interpretation, but a lived reality through ancestral Spirits interacting with the living, and together shaping the future. In this section, I examine issues of power and accountability in historiography.

History, like many – if not all – disciplines in academia, has gone through many evolutionary and revolutionary phases that have shaped it in response to contestations, revisions, re/writings and reclamation of varied historical realities. History as a discipline, Carr illustrates, has evolved from elitist conceptions and definitions of the (White) male hero(es) as sole makers and shapers of history, to “widened horizons” of the “people’s” history. The horizons had to widen, Carr argued, to include social and cultural history, in order to move away from the dominant military and political historiography of empire, war and conquest. The initial elitist conceptions of history erased the socio-historical contexts from which heroes and heroines emerged. It also erased the majority of “ordinary” people’s agency in shaping their place in history and knowledge, thereby positing them as victims or sidekicks.

15 Carr, pp. 144-145.
to the main stage and act of heroes (and sometimes heroines) in historical events.

The "widening of horizons" that Carr advocated thirty-five years ago has gained currency in contemporary academia as contemporary historiography continues to seek the "ordinary" person(s) in the social, political, economic and cultural histories historians, among other scholars, document. By widening the historiographic horizons beyond (White male) social and cultural history in Western societies to include those that had been deemed outsiders to the human story, women, the working class, the conquered peoples, the definition of history has had to shift as well. Yet, even with such an exciting development in Carr's once (highly) parochial academia, the widening of horizons has seemed to be an inclusion of a few élites in each once excluded group, in essence widening the élite club in knowledge production. Historical (and other) scholarship in Africa, for example, has been one that still does not seek to speak to the realities of the majority of people. Instead, as Kitula King'ei elaborates,

"the nature and level of the discourse is frequently cast in complex, exclusive jargon understood only by a tiny minority of technical and academic élites. The absence of free-flowing communication between investigators and beneficiaries accounts for the bottle-to-mouth model of ...research in Africa."17

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For example, the first wave of writing by African (nationalist) scholars and by feminist/women scholars in the West has been critiqued for replicating the very same practice they were rebelling against – the writing of histories that erase other (usually weaker) sections of society. Men in Africa, for instance, wrote nationalist histories that excluded women, some flattened ethnic diversity in the name of national unity, and in the process wrote a history that made them heroes. One such book in post-independent Zimbabwe\(^{18}\) *Zimbabwe Epic*, a book meant to give an affirming overview summary of the history of Zimbabwe right after political independence. This book, while quite informative and rich in text and visuals, is also, sadly, a replacement of white history with African male history. One of the striking (and disappointing) features in this book is that colonial photography of Africans feature prominently. The majority of the “meaningful” pictures portray men in heroic poses, while women, with the exception of Mbuya Nehanda, are depicted showing off ornaments, doing “women’s” chores and some such stereotypical roles. Because of the corrupt conceptualizations of history passed down by colonial education, there has yet to be a holistic historiography in Zimbabwe, balancing the toxic combination of colonial

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sexism and an acquired macho image that reconstruct African society without a balanced representation of women and children.\textsuperscript{19}

Closely connected to the foregoing gender, ethnicity and race analysis of historiography is the issue of power embedded in nationality. An (fairly) intense read of Carr's book – fine print and all – reveals the subtleties of a colonial British socialization that shaped his thinking. This colonial socialization oozes a confidence engendered by particular privileges, in his case, one can safely assume that, he was British, White, male, a mandarin and a university professor.\textsuperscript{20} Carr comes through the pages as a liberal intellectual, a man ahead of his contemporaries in assessing the discipline of history, its past and its future potentials. As already explored, he does not come through (the pages) as having made a break with the masculinist historiography. The added dimension is that

\textsuperscript{19} For critiques of the dominant gendered historiography, see among others, Gerda Lerner. \emph{Why History Matters: Life and Thought} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); \emph{Black Women In White America: A Documentary History} (New York, Vintage Books, 1973, c1972); Carolyn G. Heilbrun, \emph{Writing a Woman's Life} (New York: Norton, 1988). On the other hand, Black, Asian and South American women have critiqued white women's histories, see among others: Joy James and Ruth Farmer, eds., \emph{Spirit, Space and Survival: African-American Women in (White)Academe} (New York: Routledge, 1993); Ann DuCille, "The Occult of True Black Womanhood," \emph{Skin Trade} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Elizabeth Alexander, "Memory, Community, Voice." \textit{Callaloo} 17/2 (Spring 1994), 409; Gloria T. Hull. Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith, eds., \emph{All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave} (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982); bell hooks, \emph{Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black} (Boston: South End Press, 1989); bell hooks, \emph{Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom} (New York: Routledge, 1994).

\textsuperscript{20} This raises another important factor I will briefly mention here, that is, even though Carr advocated the study of the historian before the work the historian produced, his own book does not give the reader a sense of his own background. Maybe someone introduced him to the audience, since his book is derived from oral lectures, but the reader, deprived of Carr's live performance as it were, does not have the privilege to "study" his background. How then does one study the historian - Carr - before studying the history he is writing (about)? By depriving the reader of information on himself?
explicit and implicit in his theorizing is the inscription and canonization of Western epistemologies as frames of reference in historiography.  

For instance, the following statement about the "emergence" of Asia and Africa as historical events worth an historian's consideration make one (at least me) ask, can an historian ever remedy the effects of their socialization? He wrote:

The [European] historian is hardly yet in a position to assess the scope and significance of the Asian and African revolutions. But the spread of modern technological and industrial processes, and the beginnings of education and political consciousness, to millions of the populations of Asia and Africa, is changing the face of those continents. I do not know of any standard of judgment, which would allow me to regard this as anything but a progressive development in the perspective of world history.21

As a progressive historian calling for the inclusion of those that had been erased from history, as explored in the previous section, Carr again contradicted himself in one breath.22 His delight at African and Asian revolutions is clearly informed by a colonial ideology that understands these developments from the vantagepoint of the colonizer. For him, these revolutions are a result of the "beginnings of education and political consciousness, to millions..." spawned by the "spread" of Western technology and culture to the colonized continents. Because of his social conditioning, Carr did not "...know of any standard of judgment, which would allow [him] to regard this as anything but a

21 Carr, p. 143. my italics.  
22 See the whole of chapter six. "The Widening Horizon", pp. 128-151, for an amplified take.
progressive development in the perspective of world history."23 One wonders where in the world were Africa and Asia before these revolutions?

Carr’s delight was derived from a British culture that thrived on the pomp of its appropriation (and destruction) of other cultures – thanks to the “spread” of Western “education” and “technology.” This unproblematized education and technology was replaced by British knowledge systems that would presumably make it easier for the British historian to study Africans and Asians. Translated, this means that the English (and their colonial counterparts) having instituted their schooling system, a sort of intelligence system, would have no problem – at least not as their colonial ancestors – had in studying the “natives.” The English (male) historian would therefore not have anything to be afraid of when conducting research in colonized continents because the “spread of education and technology” legitimated the entry of Africa and Asia into “world history.” One wonders which or what world these continents had been living in prior to the “spread of [Western] technology,” and the “education and political consciousness” of the masses to be so excluded from world history, only to enter it courtesy of colonial academic approval.

23 Carr, p. 143.
One also wonders why Carr did not question what happened to the education systems and technological systems that these societies had prior to the advent and settlement of Europeans in Africa and Asia. From these glimpses, we see Carr as an historian conforming (consciously and unconsciously) to the social norms and values of his society - a thorough product of history. His lucid language glosses over the power relations entrenched in the processes of writing history, that "spreading of education and technology," in the process validating hegemonic histories and hegemonic ways of producing (historical) knowledge. One could counter argue (as he does in his book and as I discussed earlier on) that "history is interpretation", and that the historian brings "his social bias" to historiography.

To this I would say, yes, but what of the historian's accountability in his work? What is key is that the historian state up-front that her or his discussion on the likeness of the elephant is only a part of the whole animal. Neither is it the most important part, as all parts, depending on who is rendering them, are just as important as my childhood tale taught me. By theorizing such a British-centered history, Carr, yet again, contradicts a powerful point he put across earlier, that history should not validate the actions of the hero and heroines of history. He seems to forget this lesson when his own historical location is at stake. While he
was very astute in pointing out that the historian is conditioned by his socialization as a person and a professional, he did not question the vested interests and power of those who control the means of knowledge production. He did not ask critical questions that would reflect the disproportionate mis/under-representation of colonized peoples and marginalized social groups in conventional historiography. Neither did he criticize the construction and canonization of European knowledge (systems) as universal. And since he argued that "... the historian selects those facts, which are significant for his purpose..." we, the readers, have to investigate why his questions did not extend to the politico-historical peripheries whose revolutions awaited their debut in "world history." Could it be that the admittance of Africans (and Asians) as peoples with a history, therefore, education systems and technology to suit their needs would have challenged him to revisit his assumptions and therefore puncture his argument? These are important questions – to me – as they get to the theoretical foundations of historiography, particularly in places like Africa, where there is still a critical need to decolonize the (historical and contemporary) knowledge.

Influential texts need to be evaluated because if taught – particularly in Africa – as though they were representative of astute historiography, they

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would obscure the reality that he was just as steeped in the colonial arrogance of belief in the inherent inferiority of Africans and Asians. His silence on the issue of colonialism assumes that Eurocentric historical frameworks should be the standard by which research would be conducted in Africa and Asia. One can only conclude that his interests, in 1961, were for a historiography written and read through the eyes of those socialized to believe, if not in the superiority their race, then, in that of their education system.

And one last issue I would like to raise on the topic of power that Carr does not address in his book is that he did not seem to understand the reality that historical knowledge could be produced without “traditional” Western methods, for example. His argument that history had nothing do with invisible forces, for instance, tramples on those whose histories are researched, documented and preserved through interaction with invisible forces. Carr’s perception of history was indeed conditioned by his liberal English social reality, shot straight from his ancestral spring of the Enlightenment era. Carr’s classic, but obviously limited, articulation of the definition of history opens the discussion and horizons even wider than he was proposing. While he made possible the questioning, conceptualization and theorizing of the study of history way ahead of the postmodern avalanche, he was still strangled by his own
social brainwashing that posited its theoretical frameworks as universal, even when they were clearly not – the tail was never the elephant.

The questions become, how does African historiography, move beyond the deep scars inflicted by the history of Carr’s native England (and Western Europe) on those who – in his time – were still to make their appearance on the world history stage? How does the (aspiring) African historian stand up against seasoned Western historians of Africa whose own interpretations have shaped the definition of history in Africa? How does the (aspiring) historian negotiate the power of definition long vested in Euro-American scholars whose careers have been built on years of naming African historiography?

2.5 Historiography is Power, and therefore not a Neutral Tool

While I do not have the answers to the questions just posed, above, I would like to discuss one of these as a way of thinking about the definition of historical knowledge, its tools and boundaries as they pertain to Africa. History, it has to be remembered,

...is about power. In fact history is mostly about power. It is the story of the powerful and how they became powerful, and then how they use their power to keep them in positions in which they can continue to dominate others. It is because of this relationship with power that we [Indigenous peoples] have been excluded,
marginalized and 'Othered'. Colonial experience traps us in the project of modernity. 25

To address power issues in history, as a discipline that Africans can engage in, entails addressing how power as an historical and contemporary reality has shaped history. It means identifying the pillars that have held it up in academia and outside, pillars like colonialism, race, gender, class, nationality, ethnicity, ability, and sexuality. Since Carr, the bold one for his day, did not go out of the European white male comfort zone to try and theorize the meaning and definition of history from the vantage point of those deemed outside of world history, the excluded have to do it themselves and in their own way.

Historiography is a form of power that has to be acknowledged. Theorizing it as though it were not is but a pass-time of those living in denial, those giving up their right to define their history. And letting the conceptualization, research and theorizing of one's history be done by others – always – means that those others will always bring in whatever agendas suit their need(s), not (always) of the studied. As Toni Morrison powerfully articulates the power of definition in the knowledge production process, she simultaneously reclaims the history of Black people in America, technically excluded from the canonical literary text,

but its backbone, while giving a fresh reading of these texts. Morrison's study of the history of American literature speaks powerfully of how African and later African-American bodies were simultaneously inscribed and erased in the production of classic literature texts in American history. She argues that the construction of America as land of the free, a "new" world in American history (through literature) was one made possible by the Black people's bondage in American history. For there to be whiteness, there had to be blackness, for there to be freedom, there had to be bondage, each posed as a binary opposite to the other, yet permanently interlocked. Morrison goes on to suggest that the making of American history (through literature in this case) was simultaneously burdened by, and dependent on, the vilification of the Black by the White. Morrison's much more complex argument than I am summarizing here is a testimony of the kind of work that needs to be done to rupture the colonial and colonizing agendas of those keen to set themselves as the standard, without examining what the standard is measured against.

The historiographical canon Carr laid out needs to be challenged as it encourages research that is colonizing with little reflection on the

intellectual vandalism (subtle or otherwise) that passes in the name of (historical) scholarship. Powerful (and powerless) Western and diasporic Eurocentric African historians who do not interrogate their own complicity in intellectual vandalism participate in serving the interests of the powerful in leaving the powerless to posthumous historiography. Of course, the poor have agency in defining themselves, but contemporary neo-colonial (globalization) trends ignore the reality that the powerful remain (more) powerful in defining what counts as historical knowledge - despite what the poor do or say. To this end, it is important that Africa and Africans strive to take control of the definition and production of their historical knowledge. As the postmodern avalanche comes pounding, it is key to realize, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith articulated,

there can be no 'postmodern' for us until we have settled some business with the modern. This does not mean that we do not understand or employ multiple discourses, or act in incredibly contradictory ways, or exercise power ourselves in multiple ways. It means that there is still unfinished business that we are still being colonized and we know it ....

Thus my arguments are not meant to engender a paralysis of analysis, rather, they are a (critical) examination of the complex nature of historical theory and methodology so often unproblematized because at the level of intellectual production, we should recognize that theories are not mechanical tools; they affect (some will say determine) how we think, who we think about, what we think, and who thinks with us. Sometimes scholars seem to forget that intellectual tools are supposed to frame research and thinking. As

long as the ‘western] ancestor worship’ of academic practice is not questioned, scholars in African studies are bound to produce scholarship that does not focus primarily on Africa – for those ‘ancestors’ not only were non-Africans but also were hostile to African interests.\footnote{Oyeronke Oyewumi, \textit{The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 24.}

This examination has been to remind myself that indeed no knowledge is neutral, and vigilance is most for those keen to remain ardent bone collectors of our history stored in Ancestral voices.

\subsection*{2.6 Conclusion}

What, then, is one to make of Carr’s writing in \textit{What is history}\footnote{Another key issue that Carr did not directly address, is the fact that the consumers of historical knowledge like the producers of knowledge are also shaped by their own realities as they engage and interpret historical research and other documentation. This is particularly important in understanding how social memory and forgetfulness are constructed in the public domain.} As I have demonstrated in this chapter, Carr’s insightful classic, while very insightful and valuable to the theory of and practice of history came short on many counts when examined from a different angle. Because history has been taught from the perspectives of the dominant, the non-dominant find themselves working with and within predetermined boundaries and frameworks, and seeking to break out of these boundaries often entails “bloodshed.” These boundaries determine not only how historical research is conducted, but also how historical knowledge is produced, and ordered, even when those boundaries and
frameworks contradict the ethos of the people whose history is under study. For Africans, the dominant theoretical and conceptual framework has to be ruptured because in many respects it produced and continues to produce African historians (and academics) who are by and large closer to and with colleagues in Western universities than to our/their 'own' national societies.31 If the study of history – contested as it always will be – in Africa is to retain its importance and relevance in the daily lives of people, it will have to cease utilizing dominant and dominating conceptual and analytical tools of defining historiography. Rather, it has to define itself as a powerful tool for producing powerful knowledge for life, for "History is life" as a wise elder counselled (me).32

32 Howard Matthew, message written to me on a gift of a book by Chancellor Williams. The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of A Race from 4500 B.C. to 2000 A.D. (Chicago: Third World Press, 1987). It is important for me to mention that I met Mr. Matthew and his family: Canada's gospel singer star Ms. Salome Bey (his wife), and their two daughters Saidah and Tuku, at the Montreal Bistro and Jazz Club on Sherbourne Street in Toronto on a Wednesday night. My friend and award-winning photographer. David Leung, with whom I had gone to the jazz joint with introduced them to me. On Friday night we returned to the place, and unbeknownst to me, I got good luck presents from both Mr. Matthew and Ms. Bey in the form of a book from the former, and a music CD Salome Bey and The Relatives from the latter. The presents from these two elders I had just met, and had talked about Africa and African history that I was going to study at Yale University, they found it in them – in true African spirit I should add – to send me off on an African perspective of history – as written by Africans from the diaspora. I am truly thankful.
Chapter 3: "Manufacturing Consent": Historiography and the Literature Review Ritual

3.0 Introduction

In the preceding chapter, I assessed the conceptual and theoretical meanings of historiography through a textual analysis of a classic historiography text. I came to the conclusion that each society has to define its own conceptual and theoretical frameworks as a way of asserting its power over its own history – and destiny. In light of the foregoing (chapter) analysis, I review some of the key literature on Spirit mediumship in Zimbabwe, zooming in on the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that have shaped this field, more than on the thick ethnographic details of these studies.

A literature review, it is argued, is an important and necessary ritual in the process of producing knowledge in the academy. However, what is less interrogated is the power embedded in the process of ordering knowledge, an ordering that privileges certain kinds and forms of knowledge and preservation methods over others. I am referring to the (scholarly) written format that is still the quintessential form of producing knowledge in the field of history. For while significant gains

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have been made in the field of oral tradition as history, the writing of oral histories ironically affirms the primacy of written word as the most viable knowledge preservation method. In the field of Spirit mediumship in Africa, for instance, practicing mediums and their communities have become diamond mines that scholars go to, to dig the precious information and siphon it out to study books that most in the community will (almost) never read.

I am cognizant of the importance of the written word – my own thesis being such a representation – but maintain that there is an overemphasis on the written word, even by oral historians. As is accepted, the written is oral before it becomes written text, and in places like (rural) Africa, the spoken word is still more binding than the written one. To this end, Africa and Africans have to regain the conceptual and theoretical power to define historiography. In proposing this, I do not pretend that my three-decade immersion in westernized and Western education competing with African knowledge systems has not taken its toll on my notions of what counts as knowledge. I am cognizant of the dangers of trying to engage the reverse gear while traveling at high speed

[Jan Vansina pioneered this field with his seminal  and now classic text on oral tradition as history. This work set the field of African history in a new direction as it had most Westerners that dismissed Africa as without history because of limited western-style documentation. Jan Vansina, Oral Tradition as History (Madison, Wisc.: University of Madison Press, 1985). There are other seminal works, books and articles on oral history that have opened the field even further. See especially: Paul Thompson, The Voice of the Past: Oral History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Gwen Prins. “Oral History” in Peter Burke, ed., New Perspectives on Historical Writing, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 114-139.]
on the academic highway. My thesis is about finding ways of easing out of the Spirit-mediumship-as-resistance highway, a definition of the elephant by its rear end/tail to ideas on how to get to the routes that will lead me to the ChiShona definition of this (their) social institution.

My search for African theoretical frameworks and methodologies comes from the realization that for academic historical knowledge to be relevant to a majority of Africans, the language and methods of ordering this knowledge have to be that of the people from whom it was extracted. African (and Africanist) historians committed to making continental Africans their primary audience, have to utilize the epistemologies of the people they study. Reliance on the concepts and theories of Marx, Evans-Pritchard, Carr, or other European or American academic ancestors who sought to explain Africa to Western Europe and North America has not facilitated nor will it facilitate Africa's equal participation in the academic industry.

This chapter asserts that African scholars and scholars of Africa have, of necessity to revisit the use of Western methodologies to study/explain African histories and realities. For doing so, is using flawed assumptions that Western theories, methods and languages are necessarily universal, when it has been proven that they are not. In places like Zimbabwe, for
instance, the English language\textsuperscript{3} to this day draws metaphoric and literal boundaries on who can and cannot participate in mainstream knowledge production activities. The West seems so sophisticated with its abundance of information, yet so few acknowledge the fact this information is in the language(s) of the majority, and has been gathered through methods derived from the thought processes of its own people.

3.1 Literature Reviews and the "Manufacturing of Consent"

An academic literature review generally does not question issues of power in how knowledge (on Africa) is ordered. Instead, the drill is to find the "gaps" that were missed by other researchers, and then go out and search for the plugs to plug them. Having gone through the drill so many times, coming out even more discontented than when I went searching, I have come to the firm conclusion that westernized and Western articulated literature is inadequate and irrelevant to the study of African-focused research. For because of its assumed westernized and Western audience, a literature review does not question the

Creation, celebration and reproduction of individualized, abstracted, 'objective' knowledge that embody patriarchy and [scholastic] ethnocentrism. [Nor that it] has a western, English language bias and social location. The available publications and abstracts provide an inadequate and incomplete sampling basis and deny access to [other forms of] knowledge used in praxis, written in other languages and published in obscure sources such as the so-called 'gray literature' of reports and non-books. The

\textsuperscript{3} The issue of language and its importance in historiography is discussed at length in the next chapter.
association of authors' names with ideas in a literature review also suggest ownership and individual invention ... [and] too often individual authors are cited for knowledge that they appropriated and had no role in creating.⁴

Thus, my literature review of Spirit medium studies on VaShona of Zimbabwe by Western scholars has revealed that Western (and westernized) scholars engage in ancestral memorialization as much as the people they study – though they do not name their ancestral worship nor the ancestors they worship. It has been revealing to realize that Western scholarship has been subtly or blatantly, consciously and/or unconsciously herding Africans away from their ancestral practices while shepherding them to the altars of their own ancestors. I argue that knowledge produced on Spirit mediumship in Zimbabwe from Western standpoints serves Western curiosities and needs in keeping with their ancestral traditions.

As the two historical ethnographic studies as examples of how notions of ancestor worship look like when the microscope is inverted, and the "insect" is gazing at the "scientist". Through the third case study, I raise the dilemma of relying on Western scholars to generally initiate and lead (historical) research. What happens to those areas of study that might (or will never) be of interest to the powers that be in academia?

We have a history of putting [Indigenous] people under a microscope in the same way a scientist looks at an insect. The ones doing the looking are giving themselves the power to define. (Merata Mita).³

Spirit medium scholarship in Zimbabwe has and continues to be the domain of Westerners. Zimbabwean scholars and writers (also mainly men), on the other hand, have written about Spirit mediumship in artistic form, from stone sculpture, song, poetry and fiction, among other genres.⁶ Thus, canonical academic research on Spirit-mediumship in Zimbabwe was pioneered, and for a while, dominated by white male scholars, such as, D.N. Beach; P. Fry; R. Blake; M.F.C. Bourdillon; M. Gelfand; D. Lan; and T.O. Ranger, and others – a combination of historians, anthropologists and physicians. These scholars have

⁶ It is also interesting to note that over time, the English language has gained currency in the writings of most artists. These are even translated into other foreign languages, but not so much the Indigenous ones. Solomon Mutswairo is one of the pioneering Indigenous writers and he wrote in both ChiShona and English, and have had some of his works like Feso: An Historical Novel (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1956), translated into English. What is interesting, however, is that his novel Mweya wa Nehanda (Harare: Longman, 1988) has not been translated. It will be interesting to know why most of his novels on key male Spirit mediums like Mapondera and Chaminaka made it into translation but not on Mbuya Nehanda, the only female prominent female medium.


(undoubtedly) made valuable contributions to (Western) scholarship on history, sociology, anthropology, medicine, and public health in Zimbabwe. What is particularly interesting of Spirit mediumship research in and on Zimbabwe is that anthropological lenses have dominated its study, thereby setting a master narrative on the subject. My interest in the subject is the search for a different set of tools not so much to dismantle the master’s house, as this is an ongoing project, but more importantly, to “uncover and recover discredited” African ancestral intellectual legacies.


A.E. Afigbo, “The Anthropology and Historiography of Central-South Nigeria before and since Igbo-Ukwu” in History in Africa, 23 (1996), 1-15. This article effectively tackles the problem of how anthropology substituted historiography in colonial Africa using the case of Nigeria, and what the consequences have been. Also, there is a very good summative overview study of the prolific and far reaching influence of anthropological studies on Spirit mediumship in Africa done by Janice Boddy. “Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality” in Annual Review of Anthropology 23 (1994),407-34. While I shy away from the postmodern renditions this article articulates the issues of Spirit mediumship. Boddy manages to give the reader a sense that the West has finally caught onto the fact that Spirit mediumship is not to be studied as some “exotic” phenomenon. It has to be understood in its own right as a much more complex institution than was previously thought – by Westerners, of course.

The intense focus on the role of Spirit-mediums in military and political history, has also been fueled by the first generation of African scholars, intellectuals and writers who – understandably? – took this perspective to a high polish maybe in a bid to prove that Africans had a history that could stand toe to toe with the European master narrative. This literature I have to hasten to add, has been important in my own intellectual growth, as it sought to reverse centuries of manufactured African and world history: see among others, P. C. Mazikana and I.J. Johnston, Zimbabwe Epic: researched and compiled by P. C. Mazikana and I.J. Johnston; edited and designed by R.G.S. Douglas (Harare: National Archives of Zimbabwe, 1982); Robert Mugabe, Our War of Liberation (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1983); Walter Rodney, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974); Stanley J. T. Samkange, On Trial for My Country (London: Heinemann, 1966); and The Origins of Rhodesia (London: Heinemann, 1968). However, I quarrel with these scholars for imbuing (white) male chauvinism and ethnocentrism in producing (historical) knowledge – historians conditioned by their times. Also, it seems that they were more interested in responding to white historiography, anthropology, sociology .... to the point that their own work became reactive than proactive in setting African research agendas. For instance, African theoretical frameworks have yet not informed the academic study of Spirit-mediumship. Instead, Western frameworks that are assumedly “universally” applicable have been utilized as the “standard” methods of understanding this social structure in VaShona society.

3.2.1 Case Study One: Michael Bourdillon – The Shona Peoples

Dr. Bourdillon’s ethnography of VaShona peoples with a specific focus on religion is a very insightful study. First written in the mid-1970s (first print, 1976), it was one of the first thick ethnographies about African life in Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) ever written. Its three revisions and four reprints, the last reprint as recent as 1998, has prove that it “...is regarded as the best synthesis of ethnographic research so far done among the Shona.” And read from Western anthropological perspectives, it is indeed a monumental ethnography, with research design, theoretical and methodological frameworks clearly laid out. The chapters highlight important issues to the ethnography, running from historical background, through kinship and village organization; subsistence to cash economy; chieftainship; courts; sickness and personal misfortune; witchcraft; death and after; traditional religion in the family; traditional religion at the tribal level.

Yet, the style and content of the study was clearly not geared toward an African audience, and where it has been (through its three editions), it is obviously geared toward the “educated” Africans. In the first edition (which I focus on here) written during the Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) of the

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11 Michael Bourdillon, The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to their Religion (Gwenu: Mambo Press, 1976).
1970s, Bourdillon made this clear in this introductory chapter to the study. He wrote:

"The primary aim of this work is to promote among the white peoples of Rhodesia a greater understanding of their [B]lack compatriots. Hopefully a complementary study on the whites for the benefit of the [B]lack people will one day be produced."

What is most curious to me – to this day – is why he chose to “promote among the white peoples of Rhodesia a greater understanding of their black compatriots” instead of doing what he hoped someone else (whom?) would do – “study the whites for the benefits of Blacks.” Would it not have been more pragmatic to promote among Black peoples of Zimbabwe (Rhodesia), “the wretched of the earth,” a greater understanding of white Western façades like racist apartheid drummed up through colonial schooling/education? The promotion of the understanding among whites, of Blacks ironically propped the status quo. Whites still got first priority, even ancestors took over Blacks’ space and freedom, calling themselves citizens in a place they denied the same citizen (and human) rights.

Here the researcher demonstrated his allegiance to his own whiteness. His study obviously liberal perspectives carried misplaced good intentions because it turned out that the white regime used such,

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15 Missionaries are conceptualized as colonials as well in this thesis.
especially on Spirit mediumship as intelligence information. While a researcher cannot control\textsuperscript{16} what happens to their work(s) once published, it is important to note that research studies such as Bourdillon’s, conducted and written in English, using foreign ancestral (Evans-Pritchard) traditions became counter productive in places like Zimbabwe during colonialism. As David Lan observed, “information already available on Shona religion [in the 1970s] was summarized, stamped ‘Secret,’ and circulated to military commanders.”\textsuperscript{17} Thick ethnographies such as Bourdillon’s gave the “you were there because I was there”\textsuperscript{18} account of African societies, postulating an intimate knowledge of the “insect” under the microscope. Whites had at their disposal “first-hand” information on Africans, while Africans were left to learn about white people through nasty encounters in their (white) homes, churches, schools, mines, factories and plantations,\textsuperscript{19} places they were allowed in only as servants.

Another critical factor in Bourdillon’s study that I am particularly interested in, is his intellectual heritage. The theoretical framework(s) he


\textsuperscript{17} David Lan, Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe (London: James Curry, 1985). 192.

\textsuperscript{18} Clifford James, “On Ethnographic Authority”. In Representations 1, 2, Spring 1983, pp.118-146.

\textsuperscript{19} I chuckle to myself as I write this, thinking that even those of us that come to the West to study, we provide even more closer to the actual renditions of African realities, it is a catch 22 indeed.
wrote his study from reveals him as a “spirit medium” of his ancestor

“Professor Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard.” He wrote:

There is a danger when a man writes about a people he has met and studied; that the objects of the study might lose their humanity. The late Professor Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard was very much alive to this danger when he maintained that Social Anthropology should aim to be a humanity rather than a science; it should aim to see and understand the inner man rather than describe outer curiosities. *His is the tradition I should like to follow.*

The foregoing quote puts it clearly, therefore, that he could never have written from the traditions of African ancestors like Nehanda, for example, because he, like VaShona he studied, had to keep tradition. This allegiance while a noble one, does not address the issue of what or in whose tradition would who study whites for Black use. One wonders whether there will ever be a time when African Ancestors and standpoints define the frameworks for “scientifically” studying African peoples and realities from their own traditions?

My question does not make Bourdillon’s study obsolete. From an historical study of knowledge production in Africa, it is even more important as it facilitatess the understanding of how the elephant has been defined through time, and who has had the power to define. While Africans have “benefited” from such research studies, it is most important (especially for Africans) to recognize the importance of the

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ancestor in any society's life and reinstate their place within it. This is most important in inverting the gazing micro and telescopes of Western and westernized academic research, that continue to control the power to define knowledge in Africa. Western researchers have done the particular research they needed to do in African societies to "promote understanding" among themselves about us. Yet African participation in this process has not privileged Blacks over whites, as the language and method of study has continued to privilege western ancestral traditions over African ones. Studies such as Bourdillon's are sobering signposts in the journey into the African recent and remote past.

3.2.2 Case Study Two – David Lan – Guns and Rain

Dr. David Lan, for his anthropology doctoral degree (1983) at the London School of Economics (England), did his research on the Dande region of Zimbabwe. He wrote a thesis entitled Making History: Spirit Mediums and Guerrillas in the Dande Region of Zimbabwe, which he later expanded and published in 1985 as a monograph entitled Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe. This book is a staple in many sociological, historical, anthropological, and many disciplines and fields of study in various universities of the West. The research for this study was done in the early 1980s when Africans, in particular, were

waking from the trauma of a brutal seven-year liberation war
simultaneously drugged by the euphoria of political independence.

Lan’s study differs in significant ways from Bourdillon’s study, in that he
is much more interested in the phenomenon of Spirit mediumship per se
and its role in the liberation struggle. Where Bourdillon gives a
telescopic view of the “religion of the Shona peoples,” coursing through
how it is interwoven in the social structure of this society and plotting
points of interest for whites to navigate this African society, Lan gives a
microscopic perspective of the Spirit medium “insect.” He meticulously
describes and analyzes – for curious armchair tourists in the West – the
role Spirit mediumship played and plays in VaShona society, particularly
during the chimurenga – liberation struggle. The deflation is in the
declaration that:

the purpose of this book is not primarily to describe why the
peasants of Zimbabwe offered resistance to the Rhodesian state
though I deal with this at some length. Rather, my intention is to
describe one of the forms that this resistance took ....22

Now, according to my English dictionary, a description of someone or
something is “an account, which explains what they are or what they
look like. If something is of a particular description, it belongs to the

general class of items that are mentioned."23 Reading Lan's research study purpose, his thick ethnography and its attendant analysis many questions come to mind. One of them being, why would an African searching for her or his history in Lan's study want a description - no matter how thorough - of "one of the forms the resistance took" instead of the why it occurred? In what way would a description of these historical figures' lives enhance one's understanding VaShona and their thought patterns?

Lan's study, a subtler version of Bourdillon's gallant 1970s, I-do-it-for-whites-to-understand-Blacks liberal promotion of race relations shifts the discussion to a Marxist analysis - another western ancestral high altar. His study (intellectually) springs from elsewhere, driven by the relentless gaze to gauge the "progress" made in African societies. As he aptly concludes, the

study of guerilla warfare provided an unusual perspective on one of the classic themes of modern anthropology: political change at the village level.24

Since this was a study done for a doctoral degree, keeping (Western) academic traditions was a much more important element than

24 David Lan, "Conclusion". p. 225. italics mine.
contributing African derived critical theory on Spirit mediumship. 

"Rationally" reading and intellectualizing such studies is expected academic etiquette, yet how does one go through such studies with sanitized "rationality and intellectuality?" Sanitized "rational and intellectual" readings of such studies run counter to the legacy of resistance to hegemony that the Maswikro/Spirit mediums that scholars such as Lan studied.

More than contribute to and promote Indigenous ways of knowing, such studies reinforce the dominant narrative that theory comes from the northern hemisphere – the London School of Economics – and case studies – Spirit mediumship – from the southern hemisphere and it developing countryness. Knowledge about Africa theorized in this manner, sanitizes the fact and reality that Africa and Africans have been once again duped into worshipping western gods, except this time, the negotiation of this duping is much easier. It has been made easier by "education"²⁵ in post-independent Africa where western and westernized texts still make the bulk of the source of information. The question

remains; just who is worshipping whom, and who is Spirit medium for whose or what ancestral Spirit?

3.2.3 The Shifting Sand Dunes of Historiography – T.O. Ranger

Lastly, I shall briefly cast a “gaze” on an interesting observation I made from my inverted microscope, upon a read of one of the most prolific (British) historians of Africa, Terence Ranger’s *Voices from the Rocks: Nature, Culture and History in the Matopos Hills of Zimbabwe*. Professor Ranger’s prolific and ubiquitous writings on East, Central and Southern African history cannot be overstated. His earliest works on Zimbabwe, like those of other white (male) scholars have, while covering wide historical periods, ethnicities and areas, focused on VaShona. What is striking of his most recent book is his shift in focus, and most importantly the reasons for the shift in research focus. The introduction to his (as usual “document driven” and meticulously researched) book reads, in part, as follows:

In 1985 my book *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War* was published .... In the same year I organized a conference in London on the research which was being carried out or planned by expatriate researchers on Zimbabwe. As those present made their reports, I put pins in a map of the country. Two-thirds had worked or were planning to work in the eastern third of Zimbabwe.... Except for two or three projects planned for Bulawayo, no research of any sort was then planned for Matebeleland. *I began to think that I should choose a district in Matebeleland....* I hope this book

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goes some way to redress a damaging imbalance in Zimbabwean historiography (italics mine).  

What is intriguing is the fact that it is scholars like Professor Ranger who defined the study of (African) history, especially in Zimbabwe and abroad. This makes the assertion to "redress a damaging imbalance in Zimbabwean historiography" rather disconcerting. Logically, it should be those who defined what to history to study, those who wrote "definitive" African historiography who should be asking themselves, where did we go wrong to have such a "damaging imbalance?" This is to avoid the deflection of the readers' attention from the reality that the rescuer participated in the obscuring of the "forgotten's" historiography. First, and per Hegel and his contemporaries, Africans had no history, then with early liberal scholarship like Ranger's, some Africans had a history worth pursuing, while others remained in the shadows - "forgotten." Then, for whatever reason, the "omitted" become an interesting afterthought of those that "forgot" them when historiographical parameters were defined in the first place.

Evidence suggests that as the political landscape in Zimbabwe changes, African historiography is like malleable clay in the white imagination,

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and African have to continue to be thankful those with academic clout remember to include them in their prolific bibliography. This is, by no means meant to discredit Ranger’s work – me being small fish anyhow – but to point out the weaknesses embedded in relying on Western scholarship to define what is important historiography for Africa at different historical points. Their renditions of African history will continue to be the standard works, now that they have solid clout, making it harder to imagine African historiography without them.

3.3 Conclusion: Resisting the Gratitude Syndrome

As I have pointed out throughout my assessment of studies just discussed, I use these examples not to discredit the scholarship of these learned men. This would not only be disrespectful, but flawed, because these scholars – as highlighted – faithfully live up to and maintain their (Western) ancestral legacies and traditions: fastidious in their research, tightly academic in their prose and razor sharp in their Western analysis.

This is a clear call for Africa and Africans to take seriously the business of appraising their/our ancestral legacies and rituals using African yardsticks to categorize our knowledge systems. What is needed, are theoretical standpoints that seek to understand what African theoretical frameworks structured rituals like rainmaking ceremonies, for example; for theoretical frameworks, whether we like or not, define when and how
our collective memory is preserved and our amnesia cushioned. Non-insistence on theorizing our (African) Ancestors our way, following in their footsteps while inventing our own traditions is to accept the fallacy that there is African intellectual history to recover. It also feeds the fallacy that African idiom does not count for much as things European and Euro-American suffice for one and all – they are "universal." But, as Toni Morrison powerfully cautions:

The problem of internalizing the master's language is the problem of the rescued. Unlike the problems of survivors who may be lucky, fated, etc., the rescued have the problem of debt. If the rescuer gives you back your life, he shares in that life [completely]. The debt one feels one owes to the rescuer can be paid, simply, honorably, in lifetime service. But if in that transaction the rescued loses his idiom, the language of his culture, there may be other debts outstanding. Under such circumstances it is not just easy to speak the master's language, it is necessary. One is obliged to cooperate in the misuse of figurative language, in the reinforcement of cliché, the erasure of difference ..., the evasion of logic, the denial of history, the crowning of patriarchy, the inscription of hegemony; to be complicit in the vandalizing, sentimentalizing and trivialization of the torture black people have suffered. Such rhetorical strategies become necessary because, without one's own idiom there is no language to speak.28

The urgency of re-collecting our histories ourselves cannot be overstated. The manufacturing of academic consent through exclusionary literature reviews needs to be reconfigured. In the next chapter, I analyze some of the possibilities and problems of imagining a different historiography for Africa.

Chapter 4: Language and Research Methodology as Technologies of Power in African History

Either follow tradition or else in what you invent be consistent.... In publicly known matters, you will be able to achieve originality if you do not translate word for word, not jump into a narrow imitative groove, from which both fear and the rules followed in the given work prevent your escape.¹

4.0 Introduction

In conclusion, this chapter explores some of the challenges and possibilities of imagining a different African historiography. The discussion centers on two key issues, language on the one hand, and research methodologies on the other. These issues are important because the power of (Western) languages and research methodologies remain sacred cows in the study of history in and about Zimbabwe and Africa, both on the continent and in the West. I analyze these issues with the following questions in mind. First, is the English language corrupting African realities like Spirit mediumship by imposing concepts and definitions that come from experiences foreign to the phenomenon and culture in which they are lived? Second, if the mastery of research methodology is key to determining not only the rigor of research, but the knowledge thereof, why, then, is there a zealous adherence to Western methodology in the study of African history? Can there be an

imagination of African ways of searching for knowledge in the study of Africa other than the hand me down Western methodologies that are an integral part of the research process? The proposal is for African (and Africanist) scholars who (convincingly) argue the importance of Africa and its diaspora to repurpose its histories, to produce knowledge that is relevant — in language and methodology — to the majority of continental and diasporic peoples. The proposal is for scholars to produce knowledge that speaks to the "wretched of the earth"2 those who make the large "field" from which we scramble for the largest "mineral deposits" and "oil reserves" — research data — in the course of our "field" research/work. Unless the issues of language and research methodology are critically analyzed in African history, our research work is no different from that of the usually scorned (by academics) multinational corporations that extract physical resources like diamonds, uranium, platinum, gold, oil, plants and herbs in the name of profit. These resources scooped out of places like Africa — leaving gaping wounds in the environment — almost never trickle down in full measure to ordinary Africans, who neither wear platinum and diamond rings, nor drive cars to consume a large amount of oil extracted from beneath their feet. Academic research that does not speak to the people from whom the "data" was collected is also similar to the plunder that goes on in the private sector. "Field" work in this case becomes synonymous with taking from people to make academic "profit"

– a dissertation, a book, and a name as an eminent scholar ... – with little “trickling” to them in concrete ways. Demystifying knowledge for most ordinary Africans – who have also internalized notions of Eurocentric knowledge as a sign of “education” – has to necessarily happen in the radical use of Indigenous languages and research methodology apropos of the culture being “studied.”

4.1 The Politics of Language and the Technology of Research

Is the English language a “foreign anguish” or a necessary evil for Africa? This question is important because language can no longer be ignored in the study of African history since it (language) is inextricably linked to every people and society’s sense of Hunhu/Ubuntu – their definition of self. By language, I mean more than a medium of communication, but as a (or the) framework from and through which most researchers conceptualize and theorize issues pertinent to their work. As Ngugi wa Thiong’o observed,

Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history. Language carries culture, and culture

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1 NourbeSe M. Philip, “Discourse on the Logic of Language” in NourbeSe M. Philip She Tries Her Tongue, and Her Silence Breaks Softly, (Charlottetown: Ragweed, The Island Publisher, 1999), 56-59.
3 Studying in North America, for example, entails proving a mastery of the English language, and the higher one wants to move up the social ladder, the tighter the English language bottleneck.
4 See also, Kitula King’ei, “Language in Development Research in the 21st Century” in African Studies Quarterly ([online] URL: http://web.africa.ufl.edu/asz/v3/v3i3a3.htm). However, I take exception to his conceptualization of the “scholar,” which I think needs more work, right along issues of language and power in the research process.
carries ... the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world.7

Since the language — the mother tongue — is important to the researcher by and large, she/he has also to realize its importance for the "studied." To document and preserve African histories, therefore, their languages have to be preserved right along with their history so that their "collective memory bank" does not run into an overdraft, or worse still into bankruptcy. The study of European histories, even in North America, entails a mastery of the language of the history under study, for example, a student of German or French history has to have a good command of the language. Minimizing or even eliminating language in the preservation of Africa's history denies the majority of people the right to participate in how the inventions of collective historical memory and amnesia in their societies.8

Use of colonial languages in the articulation of African history — in a place where there is precious little such articulation in the mainstream — caters to an exclusive minority. This exclusivity, a direct result of

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colonial education, gives those with the mastery of the English language and Western methods of articulating issues the upper hand in determining what and even how issues of importance get articulated. I do not intend positing African Indigenous knowledge systems as without its exclusivities and Western systems as all problematic. What I am arguing is that if and when a foreign way of assessing knowledge is introduced, it becomes harder for those excluded from the “club” to participate meaningfully to the knowledge produced, other than as, sidekicks to the main act. Some scholars have classified Spirit mediumship among VaShona as exclusionary, for example, Overholt states that,

It should be noted that possession in itself is not sufficient For the assumption of this [Spirit mediumship], since among the Shona, spirit possession is rather common, but spirit mediumship is 'comparatively rare'

What is important to note of the foregoing is that even though Spirit mediumship is supposedly “comparatively rare,” Spirit “possession” is a common ground that most people can enter the discourse through. Even in its “rarity,” Spirit mediumship is not beyond people's heads as it were, because it occurs in their language, they know the methodology around the phenomenon, and can have an informed say in what goes on. A westernized and/or western scholar on the other hand cannot claim the

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same inclusive exclusivity in their ways and tools of collecting and ordering knowledge. This is largely because only they (and an exclusive academic club elsewhere) have a monopoly on how the knowledge they gather gets conceptualized and distributed for wider public consumption.

While both the Spirit medium and scholar utilize technologies of power – language and methodology – in the business of producing knowledge, there is more control of knowledge by a larger majority of people from where the Spirit medium operates than where does the western/westernized the scholar. This is not to juxtapose a binary opposition. Rather, it is to demonstrate that the Spirit medium as intellectual in an African society is not (so) exclusively in control of the technology that produces ancestral knowledge (in an African society) than does the student of “Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard” or of “classic modern anthropology” whose real audience is elsewhere.

In the study of African history and knowledge systems, therefore, African language(s) use should be an integral part of the researcher’s plan beyond a language-to-get-by to one that critically engages the “studied.” If knowledge generation and dissemination in Africa is to move beyond mass rallies and street protest, which while very important do not promote a sustained interest and responsibility, there has to be a concerted effort at making academic research accessible to a larger
majority of people. African historiography is not taken seriously by the majority of the population because of the exclusive nature of its (English) language barrier and the methods used to produce this knowledge. Language as a methodological strategy in African history is, therefore, important as it plays a gate-keeping role in inclusive and exclusive knowledge generation and production.

4.1.1 A Definition of Terms?

To illustrate the foregoing assertion(s), let me take the definitions of some key terms and concepts central to the discussion of Spirit mediumship in Africa as an example of how the English language can operate as an exclusionary technology in (written) historical knowledge production.

Firstly, the term ancestor; this has an English dictionary meaning of "...people from whom one descends.... An ancestor of something is an earlier thing from which it developed."10 The basic (Western) sociological meaning does not differ much from the dictionary definition.11 On the other hand, the term ancestor for some African societies is either non-existent or has a different social register and utility. For instance, Igor Kopytoff observes that the Suku people of south-western Congo (Kinshasa)

... have no term that can be translated as 'ancestor'. The dead members of the lineage are referred to as *bambuta*. Literally, *bambuta* means the 'big ones', the 'old ones', those who have attained maturity, those older than oneself, collectively, the term refers to the ruling elders of a lineage. A *mbuta* (singular) is, literally, one older than ego (italics in original, underlining mine).^{12}

When and how, then, did the term ancestor become central to the study of Suku spiritual/knowledge systems when the term and its attendant meaning do not register on the social scale of the Suku? The insertion of the term ancestor in the study of the Suku people, suggests that most of the knowledge generated thus far on Suku is not from Suku conceptual and theoretical standpoints. It means that those who have been curious about this phenomenon have been outsiders or insiders immersed in outsider perspectives of interpreting Suku ways of knowing.

Secondly, the term *mudzimu* (singular, plural - *midzimu*) in ChiShona language^{13} is usually translated as equivalent to the English ancestor/ancestors. However, it (also) does not easily translate, as

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^{13} Sinfree Makoni has an insightful take on the definition of ChiShona, arguing that missionary colonials, in a bid to carve denominational territory, invented ethnicity among an essentially one group of people. Sinfree Makoni, "In the Beginning was the Missionary’s Word: The European invention of an African Language: The Case of the Shona in Zimbabwe" in Kwesi Kwaa Prah. ed., *Between Distinction and Extinction: The Harmonization and Standardization of African Languages*. (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1998), 157-164. It is also worth noting that the name Shona, ChiShona VaShona, MaShona is a nineteenth century invention that according to different renditions, is a misnomer. Some argue that it came from isiZulu reference to the people they invaded coming from the south, who seeing their military vulnerability, would take to the hills for safety, thereby *besiyoshona* - disappearing. *Ukushona* in isiZulu language means to disappear. See among others, David N. Beach, *The Shona and their Neighbors* (Oxford, UK; Blackwell, 1994); *The Shona and Zimbabwe, 900-1850: An Outline of Shona History*, (New York: Africana Pub. Co., 1980); *Zimbabwe Before 1900* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984).
midzimu and mweya/Spirits come in different forms, from the familial midzimu to mashave/alien spirits. Mudzimu when spoken of by VaShona denotes and connotes an inextricable connectivity between the past, present and future. Midzimu are conceptualized as alive and in constant interaction with the living. Some children, for example, are honorifically called elders (grandmother or father) and treated differently by their family, because in VaShona cosmology, those of past generations are said to return through “new” members of the family. VaShona, articulate midzimu as being

...Like a shadow. They follow ...wherever you go. Everyone has a mudzimu because everyone has a shadow. Each of us is looked after by a mudzimu. But we must also look after them. That is why we brew beer and pour it on the ground, to appease and thank our mudzimu.14

The word midzimu comes from the term mudzi, which means root, (midzi (p) – roots). In VaShona cosmology, therefore, mu/midzimu form the base of the social structure as it means being rooted/rootedness in the past. This, however, does not mean anyone can become a mudzimu, what it means is that those that earn their place in their community and become elders while alive do go on to become midzimu and constantly interact with the living. Even the English translation of the term “spirit medium” that has so defined this area of study is different when understood from the ChiShona term svikiro (masvikiro [p]). In ChiShona, svika means

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arrive; *kusvika*, to arrive; *svikai* – do arrive (plural or honorific);

*vakasvika* – they arrived, *svikiro*, mode of arrival or Spirit medium,

*masvikiro* – the way we/they arrived or mode of arrival or plural for mediums and so it goes. The point is; “spirit possession” and “mediumship” as expressed in the English language do not capture “spirit mediumship” from African perspectives. Spirit mediumship – whose ChiShona translation could be closer to *munyai* – *go-between or mediator* – if understood from its own language gives a different meaning to the phenomenon of mediumship. These terminology and conceptual differences are important because dictionary equivalents assume a transferability of cultural experience, usually obscuring important cultural differences or even unsuspected similarities – as discussed in chapter three.

The English language, globalization notwithstanding, is still a sore spot in the side of Africa’s dilemma with how to preserve its past. Some have dubbed it their “steptongue,” while others have stated:

Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a

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guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and intend to use it.\textsuperscript{16}

And still others have mused on the contradictions of language choice by African writers and scholars. Ngugi wa Thiong’o in his reflections on “A Conference of African Writers of English Expression,” poignantly articulates the exclusionary nature of the “English Expression” pointing out that

I, a student, could qualify for the [conference] on the basis of only two published [English] short stories.... But neither Shabaan Robert, then the greatest living East African poet ...who wrote in Kiswahili, nor Chief Fagunwa, the great Nigerian writer with several published titles in Yoruba, could possibly qualify.\textsuperscript{17}

In reference to Chinua Achebe’s statement, wa Thiong’o questioned why the use of “mother-tongues provoke a tone of levity in phrases like ‘a dreadful betrayal’ and ‘a guilty feeling;’ but that of foreign languages produces a categorical positive embrace? This Achebe himself, ten years later, was to describe as this ‘fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our [African] literature’\textsuperscript{18}

It would seem that the “fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English” in African history has still to be addressed; more scholars have

\textsuperscript{17} Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature. (Nairobi: East Africa Educational Publishers [EAEP], 1986), 6 & 7.
still to contend with the reality that for and in much of Africa – despite the appearances – English is still

[a] father tongue.
[And] a father tongue is
a foreign language,
therefore English is
a foreign language
not a mother tongue.¹⁹

When English is trumped as a necessary tongue over Indigenous languages in the academic production of historical knowledge, the question is, for whom is African history being researched? Who is/are the intended audience(s) for that knowledge? Is writing history in Indigenous languages too much to ask? And why is English still so dominant even in the era of Thabo Mbeki’s (South African president) passionate rhetoric about the dawn of an African renaissance?²⁰ One would even think that he – Thabo Mbeki – should articulate his “renaissance” ideas in African languages, but he does this in English, to the African elite, themselves schooled in Western Europe and North America.

¹⁹ NourbeSe M. Philip, “Discourse on the Logic of Language” in NourbeSe M. Philip She Tries Her Tongue, and Her Silence Breaks Softly. (Charlottetown: Ragweed, The Island Publisher, 1999), 56.
²⁰ It is interesting to note that Thabo Mbeki’s articulation of an Africa renaissance is a development of a long tradition of a newly independent African country coming up with an idealist political statement that grips the continent in its tracks. The era of Nkrumah of Ghana, Senghor of Senegal ushered the era of pan-Africanism, then came the African socialism – Ujaama – of Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, duplicated in places like Zimbabwe, which at its own independence ushered in notions of governments of national unity across the racial and ethnic divide. This as history unfolded produced very interesting results. To this end, Thabo Mbeki’s renaissance call can be read in this vein, for while it is a noble idea, like that of his predecessors, it still comes from an attempt to replicate some Western historical phenomenon, which usually translates to a debate of an exclusive few, academics and other “experts.”
In post-independent Africa, most African governments did not and have not sufficiently dealt with language as an integral part of the development process. They have also not funded the reinstatement of African languages into the fabric of society, such that the social strata has moved from being defined by race/skin color as per colonialism to class, class that has also been shaped by colonial and neo-colonial realities of "education." English still occupies a prominent place in African countries, and as Makini Roy-Campbell documents through a comparative study of Tanzania and Zimbabwe’s social attitudes toward Indigenous languages,

English, Shona and Ndebele are official languages of Zimbabwe, but Shona and Ndebele have not been recognized as useful for commerce and industry. English is needed before prospective employees can be considered for employment of training. It also remains the medium of instruction in school. It is interesting to note that although Tanzania and Zimbabwe are very different in social composition and language use, attitudes towards the use of an African language as the instructional medium are similar.21

I am not, by any means, suggesting that African histories and contemporary experiences cannot and should not be described/articulated or even translated in(to) English or other languages, African or otherwise. What I am questioning is the solidly defended notion that English is the language through which intellectual activity – such as

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historical knowledge production – should be articulated in. What is less appreciated is the fact that the father tonguelessness of English, whenever it is imposed on African realities, engenders an estrangement (of the African) to the self and culture. And

the only way the status of African languages will increase is with a change in societal attitudes towards these languages; [w]ithin the societies where they are spoken. African languages must be viewed as equal in importance to English or other European languages, if not more so. African countries have hidden behind the façade of using a ‘neutral language’ to rationalize not using African languages for schooling. Although one must not minimize the complexity of language choice in many African countries, one must not render it greater than it is. Revisiting the colonial history of language will reveal that, ...many ethnicities were created by missionaries in the process of developing orthographies for the language spoken in different areas of the same territory.22

Africa should, therefore, take a leading role in reclaiming Indigenous languages in the processes of recovering its history, that power to articulate one’s perspective on what the elephant is “really” like.

4.2 Research Methods23 and “The Race for Theory”24

In this last section, I revisit the notion and meaning of research methods for African history. Like the issue of language, research as a process, and methods as techniques of gathering and ordering information and

22 Makini Roy-Campbell, 263-264.
23 I limit myself to qualitative research methods in this discussion.
knowledge, in African (particularly Zimbabwean) historiography have not been topics of vibrant discussion and scrutiny.\textsuperscript{25} Research methodologies\textsuperscript{26} – both qualitative and quantitative – remain generally unquestioned tools of knowledge gathering. One wonders why we (Africans) question the results of Eurocentric research without scrutinizing the tools that manufacture those results in the first place.

Before delving into methodology, I would also like to mention the importance of theory\textsuperscript{27} to the research process because

At the level of intellectual production, we should recognize that theories are not mechanical tools; they affect (some will say determine) how we think, who we think about, what we think, and who thinks with us. Sometimes scholars seem to forget that intellectual tools are supposed to frame research and thinking. As long as the ‘[western] ancestor worship’ of academic practice is not questioned, scholars in African studies are bound to produce scholarship that does not focus primarily on Africa – for those ‘ancestors’ not only were non-Africans but also were hostile to African interests.\textsuperscript{28}

It has to be recognized that the “foundational questions of research in

\textsuperscript{25} I should add that studies or writings that have addressed the issues of methodology have usually been pointed at specific topics like feminism, that is, questioning concepts and theories of feminism but not methodology per se. See, for example, Ruth Meena, ed., Gender in Southern Africa: Conceptual and Theoretical Issues (Harare: Sapes Trust, 1992).

\textsuperscript{26} “A methodology is a system of methods and principles for doing something, for example for teaching or for carrying out research.” Collins Cobuild English Dictionary. (London: Harper Collins Publisher, 1995). 1045.

\textsuperscript{27} “A theory is [an] idea or set of ideas that is intended to explain something. (2) If you have a theory about something, you have your own opinion about it...” (Collins Cobuild English Dictionary, 1730). (Euro) sociologically, “a theory is a set of logically interrelated propositions and the implications that follow from them, which is used to explain some phenomenon” Allan G. Johnson. The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995). 296.

\textsuperscript{28} Oyeronke Oyewumi, The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 24.
many disciplines are generated in the West,” and this has implications for African research by Africans both on the continent and in the diaspora. A discussion on research methodology necessarily means a discussion of theory, because African intellectual history has yet to be articulated beyond responding to Euro-American constructs of what counts for theory. As Barbara Christian points out, Africans (continental and diasporic) have always theorized,

... but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? (Christian, 2000:12).

Reclaiming the practice and language of theory and method in African history means retrieving those intellectual legacies that have immensely contributed to and improved Western theoretical frameworks like anthropology, biology, sociology, history,... These Western traditions have often times not only borrowed this knowledge, but have sometimes appropriated it and passed it as a Western articulation. To this end, a discussion of research methodology has to take cognizance of the fact that research

As a site of struggle has a significance for indigenous peoples that is embedded in our history under the gaze of Western imperialism and Western science. It is framed by our attempts to escape the penetration and surveillance of that gaze whilst simultaneously reordering and reconstituting ourselves as indigenous human beings in a state of ongoing crisis. Objectification is a process of
dehumanization [and to make our Ancestors and ourselves subjects is to reclaim our history].

The attempt to "escape the penetration and surveillance of the Western gaze" is, means re-theorizing the "discredited" or misnamed African ways of knowing, like Spirit mediumship, and putting them in their "proper" cultural contexts, languages and perspectives.

4.2.1 Inspecting the Microscope – (Critical) Ethnography in Perspective.

In this section, I shall take a critical look at one of the all time favorite research methodologies in researching Africa and Other peoples, that is, (critical) ethnography. To understand the history and development of ethnography as an important part of Western research methodology, I shall utilize arguments made by James Clifford in his reflective essay aptly titled: "On Ethnographic Authority." While this is certainly not the last word on the history of ethnography, and while I take exception to Clifford's postmodern assertions, it is an illuminating case study worth looking at here in light of the foregoing chapters. Through it, we can

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31 James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority". In *Representations* 1:2, (Spring 1983), pp.118-146. There are other excellent studies on the colonial legacy of ethnography and other western forms of knowledge production systems, and these make key contributions to this debate. See among others: Said, Edward. 1979. *Orientalism.* New York: Vintage.
inspect one of the most important "microscopes" of socio-cultural research, a microscope that has successfully crossed over disciplines to become a standard research tool in most fields. Its chief component is "participant observation" and in critical ethnography, self-reflexivity crucial in the research processes.

James Clifford begins his article by eyeballing the long history of ethnography, from "the 1724 frontispiece of Father Lafitau" to "the predominant mode of modern fieldwork authority signaled by: You are there, because I was there." Charting the history of ethnography from colonial travelers, through to missionaries and other random and systematic collectors of knowledge about Other lands and islands, Clifford demonstrates how ethnography as a form of knowledge production evolved from a random everyone-who-traveled could-do-it field, to a professional field exclusive to university-educated ethnographers. Ethnography, Clifford argues, became the most powerful way of knowing about the "Other" for colonial empires, and the ethnographer the sanctioned figure and power behind that construction of the "Other".

However, the status of the university-educated ethnographer was not automatic, instead, the scholar ethnographer, Clifford informs us, has

32 Clifford, p. 118.
had to fight for legitimacy. And once legitimized, academic ethnography went on to become the cartel of Western constructions of foreign peoples and their cultures. Thus ethnographer scholars, through institutional support and academic training, carved a space for themselves in the lucrative business of “field work” in foreign lands, a field that had previously been exclusively missionary, trader, fortune seeker, natural scientist and colonial administrator haven. These pioneer colonial groups usually had longer experience and more colonial capital among the researched than the university-educated scholar, making it imperative that the university-educated ethnographer utilize their “learned” status to cover for their lack of colonial clout. Clifford notes, however, that not all ethnographers fell into the Malinowskian cohort of cultural relativism that legitimized colonial ethnography and the hit-and-run type of ethnography that usually mis/under-represented particular people and their culture(s). Ethnographers like Codrington, he notes, were “...acutely aware of the incompleteness of [their] knowledge, believing that real understanding of native life beg[a]n only after a decade or so of experience and study.”

Insightful and humble as this realization might have been, it was not the course that ethnography took instead. In keeping with colonial and imperialist agenda, it charted a hierarchized knowledge system that set

33 Clifford, p. 121.
out frontiers for what counted as scientific ethnography on the indigenous in the Western academy. Academic training of the ethnographer, it was argued, would make the ethnographer's authority even more compelling unlike that of the pioneer groups because her/his observations and analysis would be more dispassionate, that is, more objective. Subjectivity colored the vision of missionaries and colonial administrators, Clifford notes, because they were passionate about their colonial agendas, that is, concerned with converting Indigenous peoples to Christianity and with direct or indirect colonial rule. The authority of ethnography (and the ethnographer), therefore, set itself up as an "objective" and scientific type of knowledge production system. It so constructed itself as one not intent on coloniality, yet in essence it was the quintessential colonial instrument.

The Western construction of ethnographic authority followed a systematic process and a specific pattern of academic development:

a) The validation of fieldwork as "scientifically demanding and heroic" ensured that the "persona" of the ethnographer was held in high esteem both in the public and academic arenas. It did not matter how long a fieldworker spent time in the field, let alone understood what they were doing, the important issue was that they spent time in the

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34 Clifford, p. 124.
35 Clifford, p. 124-126, traces these stages.
villages with the Indigenous and that put them above the rest in understanding colonized societies.

b) In keeping with Malinowskian relativism, and to legitimize the authority of the ethnographer (under such competitive capitalist circumstances), mastering Indigenous languages became a lesser preoccupation. Ethnographers only needed to get by with functional (minimum) understanding and utility of the language. This way, the ethnographer would not be disqualified as incompetent, vis-à-vis the seasoned missionary and colonial administrator who had learnt the languages. Over time, this relativism became the mainstay of ethnographic research.

c) Closely connected to the foregoing point, was “the power of observation” which became another pillar to legitimize the ethnographer’s authority. The idea was that since the ethnographer was a university-trained scholar, she/he would marshal all their scholastic skills to “objectively” write about Indigenous cultures. And from observation came interpretation done through ethnography’s signature — thick graphic descriptions of Indigenous rites, rituals, ceremonies, economies, kinship systems, and so on.

d) Searching for the unique in the general was a route that seemed to help academics cut down on the time needed to understand Indigenous cultures by isolating whatever it was that they wanted to study (the unique), and then piecing together the rest (the general).
This way, the power of theoretical abstractions helped academics carve a niche for themselves as unique ethnographers, distinct from the rest, who could not make such abstractions and distinctions.

e) Area specialization was another key aspect in solidifying ethnographic authority. Individual and collective ethnographers researched unique areas of interest in detail, effectively becoming "experts" in those subject areas. Whatever topic was of intense curious interest to the West, like spirit possession/Spirit mediumship, got more attention than other topics, enabling the West to deepen its gaze on those societies.

f) With the "short term research activity" and expert syndrome set in, each ethnographer made sure to do "fieldwork" so as to carve a niche for themselves in this enterprise – a field of study they would be known by. This way, the West was able to infiltrate "whole cultures" through the concerted efforts of ethnographers who through their university training in graphic descriptions, provided their readers with the sense that "You were there because I was there."36

It is obvious then, that ethnographic authority was an important colonial project, and over the decades, claimed a "real" knowing of the Indigenous through participant-observation. And as Clifford points out: "Participant-observation' served as shorthand for a continuous tacking

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36 Clifford, p. 118.
between the 'inside' and 'outside' of events. On the one hand, grasping
the sense of specific occurrences and gestures empathetically with the
native, on the other, stepping back to situate these meanings in contexts
that suited the ethnographer's agendas. Understood literally then,
participant-observation is a paradoxical, misleading formula.37
Ethnography thus centered on the centrality of the "fieldworker-theorist"
effectively making her/him the sole textual representative of this
fieldwork experience.38 The ethnographer ultimately the remained
powerful mediator between and among cultures.

The power of the ethnographer's experience as "insider-outsider"
(participant-observer) translated to a (written) textual representation of
these experiences - ethnography. This textual representation came with
its own power problems because "text, unlike discourse can travel."39 As
ethnographers (fieldworkers) collected the data they needed from
Indigenous cultures (extracted knowledge) and returned to their
homeland, they were removed from the contexts of the actual research
experiences - digging up the raw material to process it elsewhere. This
had and has had serious implications for what and who got represented
by the ethnographer, in what ways, what got included, left out, and
ultimately for what purpose(s) the ethnography was to serve in the end.

37 Clifford, p. 127.
38 Clifford, p. 128.
39 Clifford, p. 131.
Because of the "unreciprocal quality of ethnographic interpretation, ...[it means] neither the experience nor the interpretive activity of the scientific researcher can be considered innocent."\footnote{Clifford, p. 133.} The ethnographer's authority is, therefore, just as questionable and subject to inquiry as the studied Indigenous culture(s). With the foregoing in mind, I believe that Western research methods cannot serve the needs of those of us that seek to recover and build knowledge focused on Africans primarily. This is because research tools – microscopes – like ethnography (critical or not), serve the purposes of speaking to a different primary audience than what I would be interested in, for instance. To this end, it becomes important to learn those ways of ordering and representing knowledge this can set Africa to a path of owning and controlling its technologies of knowledge production like language and methodology.

4.3 So, What Does the Elephant Look Like?: Conclusions.

It has been my struggle in this thesis, to wade through conceptual, theoretical and methodological minefields that have for so long been the mainstay of my academic career. Besides my being very junior in the field, it has been important for me to clarify these obviously central issues as my search – in my doctoral research – is intent on not genuflecting at the altars here mentioned. My intent, henceforth, is to
work from African (Indigenous) conceptual and theoretical perspectives, learning to produce knowledge in Indigenous languages and from those standpoints, so the debate is not focused on and by Western ways of knowing, but knowledge systems from which the African knowledge being ordered comes. However, having been trained in westernized and western education systems, I do not have fantasies about how “wonderful” an experience this will be.

Instead, I am indignant that my education did not prepare me for this. And more frightening is the fact and reality that I shall have support from very limited quarters. Most African and Africanists scholars and ordinary people – at least a significant number I have talked to about my project – are deeply steeped in the belief that reform and modification of Western frameworks is the way to go because these are “universal” theories and methodologies, all else is primitive. To my mind, it seems the tail bearer in my childhood story has triumphed in convincing a lot more people, that understanding the elephant has to be from the rear, or somewhere close, and not from other perspectives. On the other hand, all this tension is what is also attractive about my research project because, for once in my life, I get to engage in “original” work that I know little about. I have to (re)learn how to think from Indigenous perspectives and in Indigenous languages, in order to produce academic work that does not regurgitate or react to Western ideology. Instead, it will be
work, I envision, that seeks to recover African ways of knowing, challenging the intellectual inertia that has set in as most people stampede to master western ways of knowing.

The answers to what is history, what is literature and a literature review, what are the classic texts representing African knowledge systems, which language(s) and methodology to use will come, I hope, from the educating experiences and deeply challenging realities of hands on research. That is, balancing my own doctoral research interests and requirements, with those of my Ancestors and the living community so as to preserve the future for both African and non-African generations to come.