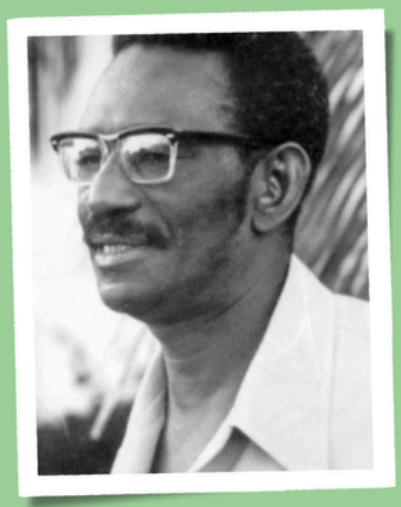




LECTURE SERIES NO. 22, 2025

Foundational Principles for Social Research in Africa

Amy Niang

About the Program

The African Peacebuilding and Developmental Dynamics (APDD) Program is the newly rebranded initiative of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) that bridges the strengths of the erstwhile African Peacebuilding Network and Next Generation Social Sciences in Africa (APN and Next Gen) program.

APDD advances African-led research and scholarship on peacebuilding, governance, and developmental changes in conflict-affected countries and sub-regions in Africa. The program responds to the evolving geographies of conflict, development, and inequality on the continent – examining economic, environmental, and political trends, the emergence and dynamics of new actors, and the interplay between local and external factors driving socio-economic transformations, conflict trajectories and evolving peacebuilding responses.

About the Series

TThe APDD Lecture Series provides an avenue for influential thinkers, practitioners, policy makers, and activists to reflect on and speak to the critical issues and challenges facing African peacebuilding. This publication series documents lectures given on the platform of the African Peacebuilding and Developmental Dynamics (APDD) program, and its institutional partners. These lectures provide an analysis of processes, institutions, and mechanisms for, as well as the politics of peacebuilding on the continent, and contribute towards broadening debates and knowledge about the trajectories of conflict and peace in conflict-affected African countries and regions. The Lecture Series seeks to address knowledge gaps in African peace and security, including its links to local, national, and global structures and processes. These publications also provide critical overviews and innovative reflections on the state of the field, including new thinking critical to knowledge production and dissemination in overlooked or emerging areas of African peacebuilding..

Acknowledgments

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Foundational Principles for Social Research in Africa

Figure 1.0: Cheikh Anta Diop
Source: *Flickr*

Figure 2.0: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o
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Introduction

Foundations of knowledge are not necessarily anchored in libraries, archives, or abstract systems. They can take root in forests replanted, in languages reclaimed, and in revolutions begun. The guiding principles of African social research have often been forged, not in the security of textbooks, but through the struggles of those who insisted on study, creation, and resistance in times of rupture.

In what follows, I reflect on a few foundational principles for social research, not through abstract theorisation, but through the lived intellectual journeys of six remarkable thinkers, namely Cheikh Anta Diop, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Sylvia Wynter, Wangari Maathai, Amílcar Cabral, and W.E.B. DuBois.

These are, in many ways, my own chosen companions in thought, and the selection is therefore subjective. Others might draw up a different shortlist, but I believe each offers critical insights that deserve sustained engagement. What I present here are snapshots of their thought, guided by a hermeneutic approach to reading Black intellectual traditions. This is why I speak of principles for African social research rather than principles of African social research, as my aim is not to offer doctrine, but to engage in interpretation.

I approach this topic through a dialogical reading of these six thinkers, being attentive to the resonances among them. Taken together, their work demonstrates that no single perspective or discipline can fully capture the complexity of African historical and social realities. Their thought highlights the necessity of intellectual pluralism. This openness arises from reading both closely and broadly, from listening across generations and geographies, and from recognising that grappling with complexity is far more fruitful than retreating into reductive conclusions. Above all, I see this exercise as a generative practice of interpretive reading, where scholarly dialogue itself is a meaningful mode of knowledge-making.

Underlying this choice is a deeper concern to understand the conditions under which sociological and historical knowledge is produced in Africa. Scientific inquiry is never abstracted from its space-time coordinates; its validity is always conditioned by particular historical contexts. If colonialism, in its political, economic, and epistemic aspects, looms large in shaping those conditions, Cabral, Wynter, and Maathai, in particular, show us how research can itself become an act of repairing bodies and knowledge systems that have been dislocated by crisis.

Each of the six thinkers I consider here confronted a crisis. Each chose to build rather than withdraw. Each rooted knowledge in land, language, history, community, and an emancipatory philosophy. Each refused incorporation into the errors of their own times. They insisted on clarity of thought, lucidity of vision, and the moral duty to name the world truthfully.

Figure 3.0: Sylvia Wynter
Source: *Flickr*

Figure 4.0: Wangari Maathai
Source: *Wikimedia Commons*

To understand the stakes of their work, however, we must first trace a longer history, one that begins not with colonialism, but much earlier with the erosion of Africa's intellectual ecosystems.

Across many generations, Africa was home to thriving centres of learning, governance, and innovation. Great Zimbabwe, with its monumental stone architecture and sophisticated political systems, testifies to African statecraft. To the west, Timbuktu flourished as a hub of Islamic scholarship, boasting libraries, universities, and legal schools that drew scholars from across the Sahel and Sahara. In the northeast, the Kingdom of Kush, often overshadowed by Egypt, was a centre of science, art, and political philosophy. Ethiopian Orthodox traditions, preserved in the liturgical language of Geʿez (ግዕዝ), nurtured rich theological, astronomical, and historical knowledge for centuries. Along the Swahili Coast, cities such as Kilwa and Mombasa became vibrant nodes of intellectual exchange, where African, Arab, and Persian ideas mingled in law, poetry, medicine, and navigation.

For centuries, knowledge in Africa was abundant, diverse, and dynamic. It was transmitted through written manuscripts, oral traditions, architecture, cultural, and ecological practices. It travelled in many forms along desert caravans, through sacred groves, between griots and apprentices, from stone to script, from memory to ritual. This flourishing was, however, not eternal. The fall of Al-Andalus in 1492, once a central link in trans-Saharan scholarly networks, severed Africa's connection to global Islamic and philosophical discourse. Manuscripts were destroyed or displaced, and intellectual life narrowed, often tilting inward under external pressure.

Then came the Atlantic slave trade, which devastated the continent for centuries. Communities were torn apart; generations of thinkers, elders, and apprentices were captured or killed.

Oral traditions fractured, intergenerational transmission faltered, and resources were diverted from education to survival through warfare, raiding, and social strife.

Figure 5.0: Amílcar Cabral
Source: *Flickr*

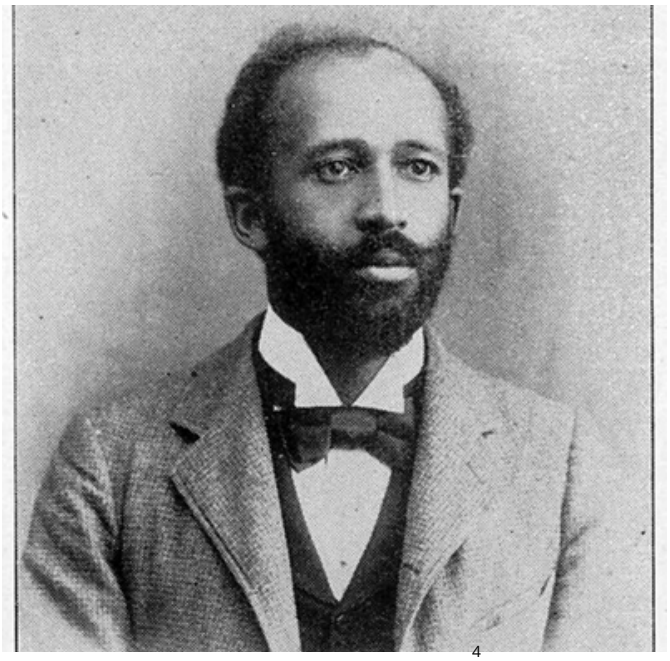

Figure 6.0: W. E. B. Du Bois
Source: *Wikimedia Commons*

By the time colonialism arrived, Africa had already endured centuries of intellectual haemorrhage. Traumatised and fragmented, its knowledge systems were dismissed by European colonisers as non-existent or inferior. Africa was portrayed as a continent without history, without established political institutions, and without significant contributions to the world of ideas. This erasure was not natural; it was the outcome of systematic extraction, suppression, and rupture. And yet it is precisely from these ruptures that new forms of knowledge emerged.

This talk is framed around six core principles, each tied to one of the six intellectual figures mentioned above. They do not exhaust the possibilities of African social research, but they exemplify the richness and resilience of African and diasporic thought in the face of rupture.[1]

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

Cheikh Anta Diop: History as Struggle, Science as Liberation

Cheikh Anta Diop was born in 1923 in Senegal, at a time when the weight of French colonial rule pressed heavily on everyday life. Gifted in the sciences from an early age, he might easily have followed a path of pure technical mastery. Yet what stirred him most deeply was not equations or experiments, but history, the search for origins and meaning.

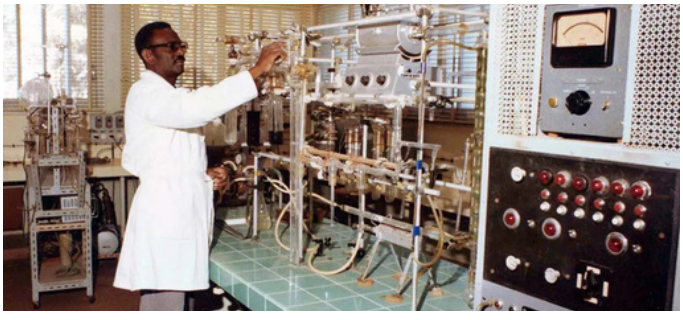

Figure 7.0: Dr. Chiekh Anta Diop
Source: *DISA*

Like so many African intellectuals of his generation, he was haunted by a question that was both simple and radical, namely, who were we before colonialism told us who we were not?

INTRODUCTION - KEY TAKEAWAYS

Foundations of knowledge in Africa emerge from lived experience—through land, language, and struggle.

No discipline or worldview can capture Africa's complexity; research must embrace multiplicity and dialogue.

Knowledge is historically situated—colonialism, crisis, and repair shape how and why research is produced in Africa.

The essay engages in the intellectual contributions of six African thinkers (Diop, Ngũgĩ, Wynter, Maathai, Cabral, DuBois).

The six thinkers exemplify the richness and resilience of African and diasporic thought in the face of rupture.

After completing his secondary studies in Dakar, Diop moved to Paris, where he pursued studies in physics, chemistry, linguistics, and history at the Sorbonne. Even before he completed his studies, he was already considered a radical intellectual, not least given the paradigm-shifting research agenda he was busy developing. Diop argued that the humanities ought to be reconstituted on an Egyptian foundation - culturally, intellectually, linguistically, geographically, and historically - in the same way that Greek civilization served as the cornerstone of Western humanistic tradition.

While many of his peers debated Marx and Descartes, Diop set himself a different task to prove that Africa was not the periphery of civilisation but its cradle. His doctoral dissertation, which argued that ancient Egypt was fundamentally a Black African civilisation, was repeatedly rejected by the French academic establishment. He was told it was 'too political,' unscientific, and provocative. In 1954, he could not even form a dissertation committee, and when he finally managed to defend in 1960, he was given only a "mention honorable," which effectively barred him from an academic career in France.[2]

Diop's philosophy of history explores two-pronged ideas about the nature of history and its ultimate ends. Diop mobilised the tools of the hard sciences (carbon dating, linguistic analysis, palaeontology, chemistry, anthropology, and climatology) into African historiography. He was one of the first to establish a radiocarbon dating laboratory in Africa. His book *The African Origin of Civilisation: Myth or Reality* exemplified this method, bridging empirical research with historical recovery, using chemistry in the lab, philology in the library, oral history with the broader community and even melanin dosage tests on mummies to substantiate what oral traditions and cultural continuities had long affirmed, namely that Pharaonic Egypt was, at its core, Negro-African.[3]

Diop's approach was therefore two-fold. He broke with the anthropological gaze and Western ethnology that had long defined the dominant corpus of knowledge on Africa. In their place, he expanded his methodological toolkit and mobilised linguistics, archaeology, history, and the natural sciences as integral avenues for reclaiming Africa's past.

Secondly, Diop demonstrated that history was not just a literary field but a battleground. Africans, he argued, needed to be equipped with evidence, methodology, and epistemic confidence—in his words, they needed to be "armed with science" to confront the world. For Diop, colonial knowledge systems had distorted African past, not just by omission, but by active falsification. It imposed a false 'realism' that discouraged long-term vision and left Africans divided and vulnerable. Independence without historical consciousness, he warned, would merely reproduce dependency. History, then, was not an inert archive of the past but a living source of political power necessary to "restore, structure, and dynamize the historical consciousness of peoples."[4]

His work stands as a model of intellectual sovereignty, an example of research carried out for Africa, by Africans, with African interests at the centre. Diop was not simply correcting the historical record. He was laying a foundation for African dignity in showing that liberation had to be cultural as well as political.

Figure 8.0: Dr. Chiekh Anta Diop
Source: *Wikipedia*

Equally central to Diop's work was his insistence that cultural unity was not merely symbolic, but material as well. In *Alerte sous les Tropiques* (1955), he argued that Africa's weakness lay not in a lack of resources but in the absence of "grandes idées directrices," in other words, guiding ideas capable of binding peoples together.[5]

He sought to identify the generative rather than merely the evolutive factors shaping societies. This brought him into direct confrontation with the dominant historiography of science, which cast knowledge as a linear teleology from Galileo to Newton to Einstein. Such narratives, he argued, were not innocent; they inscribed Africa as a continent without rationality, a province confined to myth and tradition. Such narratives, he argued, were not innocent; they inscribed Africa as a continent without rationality, a province confined to myth and tradition. Against this 'colonial library' (Mudimbe),[6] Diop affirmed that temporality itself was not the monopoly of Europe. African cosmologies, oral traditions, and ritual practices embodied rationalities fully capable of producing universal truths. To take them seriously was to dismantle Europe's epistemic monopoly and affirm a plurality of universalisms.

In this sense, Diop's work represented not a supplement, but an epistemic rupture. Just as Kuhn described science as advancing through paradigm shifts that reconfigure the very conditions of intelligibility, so too did Diop's historiography demand a reconfiguration of global knowledge. He refused to consign Africa to the status of folklore or 'prehistory.' Instead, he demanded its recognition as co-author of world civilisation. Africa, for Diop, was not to be treated as a museum of the past but a living archive of futures.

Diop's concern, above all, was historiographical, focusing on the diverse sources of African history and knowledge that had remained insufficiently explored. For him, history was the study of the rules and general laws of social evolution, the dynamics that govern social movement. In this view, the past was not a closed archive, but a terrain where history intersected with myth and collective memory. Diop approached it as a historian of civilisations, attentive not only to events but to vast and sweeping periods that revealed the deeper patterns of human development.

In this view, the past was not a closed archive, but a terrain where history intersected with myth and collective memory.

What interested him most was the comparative history of socio-political institutions (i.e., their successive forms, the generative rather than merely evolutive factors that shaped them). For Diop, the liberation of African societies required the liberation of their historical consciousness. Consciousness itself —the conviction of a people in their own capacities —depended on how they understood their history, how they situated themselves in relation to the histories of others, and how they grasped the broader history of humanity across different periods of social transformation.[7]

The first foundational principle for African Social Research is that it must be a conscious struggle that is rigorous, purposeful, and decolonial. It must resist historical erasure, challenge distortion, and construct truth as a form of self-determination.

For Diop, reclaiming the African past was not nostalgic revivalism, but a political and epistemological imperative. To reclaim history was to cultivate a living temporality of transmission, a collective consciousness capable of engendering sovereign futures.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o: the Mind is a Site of Struggle

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was born in 1938 in colonial Kenya's Kiambu District, at a time when British rule sought to govern not only the land but also the minds. The Mau Mau uprising, a fierce struggle for land and freedom, profoundly shaped Ngũgĩ's childhood; it imprinted his political awakening with the visceral reality of a lived rupture, not a distant abstraction. His own family's land had been seized under the British Imperial Land Act of 1915, and two of his brothers lost their lives, one in clashes with the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, the other during the State of Emergency.

Figure 9.0: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o
Source: *Flickr*

This intimate encounter with dispossession and resistance became a structuring theme in his later work. Educated first in missionary-run and independent Gikuyu schools, and later at Alliance High School, Ngũgĩ was introduced early to the contradictions of colonial education, a system designed to cultivate an African elite while simultaneously suppressing African cultures.[8]

At Makerere University, where he studied English literature, Ngũgĩ began writing fiction that probed these tensions. Early novels such as *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965) grappled with the dilemmas of nationalism, colonialism, and cultural fracture. Yet even as these works earned him acclaim, Ngũgĩ remained unsettled by the disjuncture between the English literary tradition he had mastered and the Kenyan realities he sought to narrate.[9]

> **The Mau Mau uprising, a fierce struggle for land and freedom, profoundly shaped Ngũgĩ's childhood; it imprinted his political awakening with the visceral reality of a lived rupture, not a distant abstraction**

He became one of East Africa's most celebrated novelists while still in his twenties. However, by the 1970s, a shift began to occur. Ngũgĩ came to recognise that writing in English, however brilliantly he did it, was part of a deeper epistemic trap. In his landmark work Decolonising the Mind (1986), he argued that language is never neutral but "a carrier of culture," memory, and values.[10] To impose a foreign language is to impose a foreign worldview, a "cultural bomb" that erodes a people's belief in themselves, their heritage and struggle, and their capacities.[11]

In 1977, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o co-authored and staged *I Will Marry When I Want* (Ngaahika Ndeenda) in Gikuyu alongside local villagers, a bold collaboration that vividly portrayed class struggle and corruption. This unflinching depiction provoked the Moi regime, leading to Ngũgĩ's imprisonment. His 'crime' was neither conspiracy nor violence but the radical act of writing and performing in an African language to amplify the voices of ordinary people. While in prison, he wrote *Devil on the Cross* in Gikuyu on toilet paper, a defiant gesture that underscored his commitment to decolonising literature through African languages. This theme also resonates deeply in his works *Writers in Politics* (1981) and *Barrel of a Pen* (1983), where Ngũgĩ positions language as a critical battleground for cultural and political emancipation. In these texts, he urges writers to wield their craft as a weapon against neocolonial domination and to champion art as a tool to empower the masses. This shift was not merely aesthetic but marked a profound methodological revolution. As Simon Gikandi observes, Ngũgĩ's evolution from novelist to political dissident mirrors the trajectory of African nationalism itself, from its initial promise to its subsequent failures and eventual betrayals.

Figure 10: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o
Source: *Flickr*

For Ngũgĩ, true liberation required cultural and linguistic sovereignty. Decolonisation had to extend beyond the political into the epistemic; it required reclaiming African languages as vehicles of thought, imagination, and struggle. Ngũgĩ's theoretical writings, most notably *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), crystallise this position. There, he insists that "the choice of language and the use of language is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their environment and to the universe."[12]

The dominance of English, French, and Portuguese in African literature, Ngũgĩ argued, perpetuated neocolonial dependency by alienating Africans from their own realities and severing literature from its true audience —the very people whose stories were being told. For him, African languages are not barriers to modernity but gateways to plural futures given their rootedness in lived realities yet capacious enough to voice universal struggles. His project gestures toward an expanded horizon of thought that is at once a comparative exercise and a methodological shift, calling for the apprehension of the world through African conceptual categories as a means of enlarging the universe itself. Critics have noted, in turn, his fidelity to a Marxist dialectical materialism that refuses to divorce literature from ideology or social struggle; therefore, his insistence instead that art is never neutral but always a weapon in the battles it depicts.[13]

> **"The choice of language and the use of language is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their environment and to the universe.**
>
> **Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o**

Ngũgĩ's life and work exemplify a second foundational principle for African Social Research, which is that without linguistic sovereignty, there can be no epistemic freedom. Language is not merely a medium of communication but a structure of knowledge. For African research to be truly foundational, it must be grounded in African accounts, thought, and imagination.

For Ngũgĩ, art could never be 'for art's sake.' Literature was always an intervention and a means to expose class structures, to mobilise collective consciousness, and to imagine alternative social orders. His novels, from Petals of Bloodto Matigari, exemplify this engaged aesthetic through its use of realist critique with allegorical force."

As Ngũgĩ reminds us, to master another's language is to expand that language and its expressive possibilities, to reclaim one's own language is central to cultural survival and self-definition, for "language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history."[14]

Sylvia Wynter: Rewriting the Epistemic Order

Sylvia Wynter was born in 1928 in Kingston, Jamaica. Trained in the British literary tradition, she mastered Shakespeare and Milton; yet, her own world was structured by the afterlife of slavery, plantation society, evolutionary theories, and racial capitalism. In many ways, she was a child of colonial contradictions. Her intellectual journey began in literature and later moved through history, philosophy, and anthropology. Across these fields, Wynter produced work that is both complex and transformative, animated by a deep commitment to reimagining the very grounds of knowledge itself.

Figure 11: Sylvia Wynter
Source: *Nottingham Contemporary*

At the heart of Wynter's intellectual project lies a central question. What does it mean to be human in a world designed to deny your very belonging? And beyond that, what does it mean to be human at all?[15] She came to the recognition that what we call the 'human' is neither neutral nor universal but a construct -the master-category Man- forged through the European Enlightenment, colonial conquest, and the transatlantic slave trade. This universal Man rests on a false cosmogony, first theocentric, then biocentric, and is figured as rational, white, Western, and male. It is the measuring stick for all humanity. Consequently, everyone else - Black, colonised, indigenous, queer- was rendered "other than human" if not subhuman.

This critique is developed through Wynter's 'sociogenic principle,' which insists that human beings are always co-constituted through symbolic codes, narratives, and social orders, and cannot be reduced to biology alone.[16]

For Wynter, Man is not only an exclusionary category but also the organising principle of a socio-poetic and epistemic order that naturalises racial hierarchy.

Against this overrepresentation, she advances the figure of the human as homo narrans, storytelling beings whose species identity is hybrid, constituted through both mythoi and bios.[17] If humans are made through stories, then to 'rewrite' the human is to intervene in the very codes that structure knowledge, to dismantle the colonial order of being, and to open the possibility of new, decolonial universals.

This insight underpins Wynter's call to turn toward "genres of the human" that exist outside European modernity, including African traditions, maroon communities, and the insurgent poetics of the Caribbean. These alternative modes of life and thought open space for re-narrating the human and probing the material as well as epistemological structures of consciousness.

The experience of the world offered by European universalism to Black existence is inseparable from its relation to the living world, a relation fatally tethered to the epistemic and ontological confines of European Man.[18] Wynter's thought thus offers a foundational shift in how knowledge itself is conceived. She developed one of the most profound historical and philosophical critiques of the modern West.

For Wynter, moments of crisis – whether colonialism, slavery, or climate catastrophe- do not simply signal breakdowns, but are moments to reimagine what counts as knowledge and who counts as human. Her work encourages us to view research itself as a practice of worldmaking, rather than simply an exercise in data collection. To know differently is already to reclaim one's humanity. In this sense, research can be an act of poiesis, a creative remaking of the world rather than a passive reflection of it.

Her invitation is to invent new modes of existence and new epistemic orders. In this sense, her critique both resonates with and extends debates around natural rights. Whereas thinkers such as Arendt analysed rights tied to specific geographic and political contexts, Wynter goes further in showing that geography is not only physical but ontological.

As I have also argued in 'The International,' there is no single 'objective' way of inhabiting the world.[19]

Sylvia Wynter's divergence from Marxism offers profound insight. While embracing Marx's critique of social structures, she posited that the plantation, not the factory, served as the foundational site of capitalist modernity. For Wynter, slavery and anti-Blackness transcend the analytical lens of labour and raised deeper questions of subjectivity and human identity.

Drawing on Caribbean thought, African cosmologies, Black radical traditions, and indigenous epistemologies, Wynter proposed that we delink knowledge from conquest and begin to build from below, from memory, from multiplicity, and from practices of survival and creativity. She urged us to "make the human anew."

This proposal is not merely descriptive but prescriptive. It demands what Sarah Truman terms "inhuman literacies," practices of refusal, affect, and re-storying that destabilise the humanist order from within.

Finally, Wynter's work calls us to rethink theory itself. For her, theory is not detached analysis but a political, spiritual, and cultural practice. Who produces knowledge, and how, is just as important as what knowledge says. She demonstrates the necessity of reflexivity.

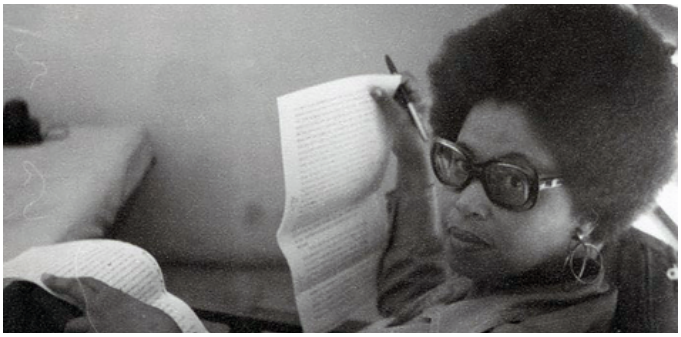

Figure 12: Sylvia Wynter
Source: *Nottingham Contemporary*

The implications of this argument are particularly significant for African social research. The third foundational principle is that it must unmake inherited canonical categories - especially those that dehumanise - in order to create space for alternative ontologies. Social science often claims that its first methodological gesture is observation, yet to observe and explain a phenomenon is already to construct a representation of it. African research must not only study the world as it is. It must unmake the world as it has been imposed. It must refuse the colonial category of the human and build knowledge grounded in plural, situated, living worlds. The researcher is not a detached observer but an engaged participant, and thought is not merely a reflection on the world but an active force in shaping new realities.

Wynter reminds us that colonialism did not only steal bodies, land, labour and culture. It stole categories; it rewrote the very terms of social reality through damaging taxonomies imposed on both human and non-human entities.

Wangari Maathai: Ecology, Knowledge, Liberation

Wangari Maathai was born in 1940 in the central highlands of colonial Kenya. Her childhood unfolded amid lush forests and communal farming, where land was more than a resource but a relationship, a source of identity, livelihood, and spirituality.

Maathai left Kenya on a scholarship during the Kennedy-era airlifts and studied in the United States, then in Germany, eventually earning a PhD in veterinary anatomy. She was the first woman in East and Central Africa to achieve this distinction.

At first glance, Maathai seemed to be a conventional scientist - precise, methodical, and well-trained in Western biology. Yet upon returning home, she confronted a stark knowledge crisis. Hillsides had been stripped of forests, soil washed away, rivers run dry, and women forced to trek miles in search of firewood. She realised this was not just environmental degradation but the outcome of a longstanding, systemic politics of neglect, the afterlife of colonial land alienation, and the gendered costs of ecological collapse.

In 1977, Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement, a grassroots initiative that began with the deceptively simple act of planting trees. Women in rural communities reforested their land one seedling at a time and transformed ecological survival into a mode of political resistance.

Figure 13: Wangari Maathai
Source: *Wikipedia*

Her work embodied what Garima Rawat and V. K. Gaurav describe as a critique of colonial invasion and environmental degradation, in other words, a recognition that deforestation and soil erosion were tied to the long durée of colonial dispossession.[20]

Her praxis enabled critical connections across three domains: science and indigenous ecological knowledge, women's labour and environmental sustainability, community autonomy and political struggle. In doing so, Maathai anticipated a feminist political ecology that dissolves boundaries between science, activism, and theory.

The state's reaction was repression. Maathai was harassed, beaten, and imprisoned, yet she refused to surrender. Her body itself became a site of protest - what scholars have described as a living epistemology. In defending forests, she defended a way of knowing the world in which land, body, and spirit could not be separated.

Her 2004 Nobel Peace Prize lecture captured this vision. "In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness… That time is now." This was not only a moral appeal but a call to epistemic transformation. As James Wachira shows, her speech has been remediated in Afrofuturist imaginaries, such as Wanuri Kahiu's film Pumzi, which stages tree planting, soil regeneration, and the preservation of water as acts of futurity.[21] Maathai's appeal to "help the earth heal her wounds" thus resonates beyond her immediate activism and offers a vision of planetary survival that weaves together African orature, ecological knowledge, and speculative futures.

Maathai's thought reconfigures both ecology and the practice of research. She dismantled the presumption that legitimate knowledge flows only from universities and formal institutions. Rural women, in her view, were not mere 'informants' but theorists of land, resilience, and justice. She exposed the way anthropology and development studies policed the boundaries of knowledge, deciding who could speak as a knower, while she insisted on epistemic parity between villagers and scientists. For Maathai, knowledge was never abstract. It lived in the soil, moved with rivers, and took root in the hands of women.

Her body itself became a site of protest - what scholars have described as a living epistemology. In defending forests, she defended a way of knowing the world in which land, body, and spirit could not be separated.

In this light, the fourth foundational principle for African Social Research is that African knowledge must integrate land, body, community, and ecology. Research must be rooted in the material and embodied realities of the everyday. It must recognise community practice, especially women's labour, as a site of theory and transformation. As Maathai reminds us, liberation is never an abstraction; it is ecological, practical, feminist, and profoundly political.

Maathai's appeal to "help the earth heal her wounds" thus resonates beyond her immediate activism and offers a vision of planetary survival that weaves together African orature, ecological knowledge, and speculative futures.

Her life stands as both a summation and a critique of knowledge production. By planting trees, she rewrote the categories through which life is valued. By defending forests, she defended futures. By linking ecology with social and gender justice, she placed African women at the centre of epistemology. Maathai's legacy is an integrated praxis of critical solidarity and revolutionary care, an insistence that research must not only explain the world but participate in healing it.

Figure 14: Wangari Maathai
Source: *Flickr*

Amílcar Cabral: The Weapon of Theory

Amílcar Cabral was born in 1924 in Bafatá, Guinea-Bissau, under Portuguese colonial rule. After completing his secondary education in Cape Verde, he went to Lisbon, where he studied agronomy at the Instituto Superior de Agronomia. His time in Lisbon was decisive. He mastered the scientific techniques of soil analysis and crop assessment, but also became immersed in anti-colonial networks through friendships forged with other African students such as Agostinho Neto and Mário Pinto de Andrade. Alongside exposure to Marxist thought and European debates on empire, these encounters sharpened his sense that colonialism was not simply political domination but a comprehensive system of economic and cultural exploitation.[22]

In the early 1950s, soon after graduating, Cabral returned to Guinea-Bissau and was employed by the colonial administration to carry out a national agricultural survey. Officially, his task was to map the country's soil quality, crop yields, and ecological zones.

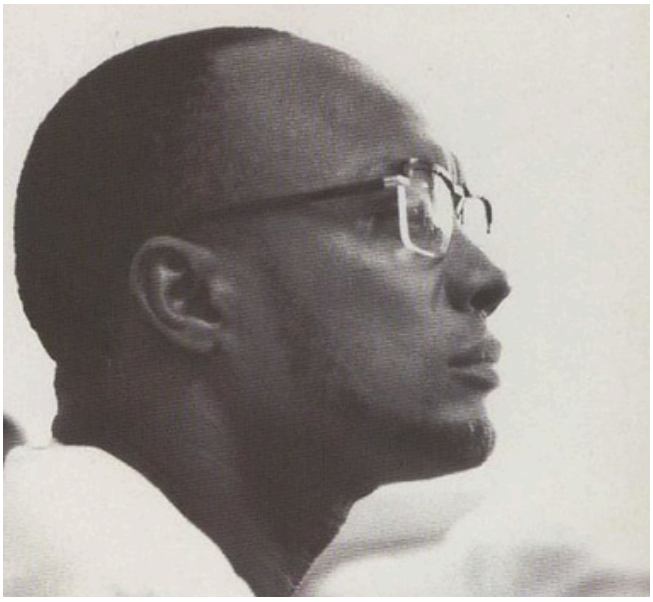

Figure 15: Amílcar Cabral
Source: *Flickr*

Equally central was his insistence, echoing Ngũgĩ, that culture lies at the heart of liberation. Colonisation, he argued, was not only a political or economic project but an epistemic one that sought to erode cultural identity and historical consciousness. To resist, then, was to reclaim culture as a source of dignity and a force for mobilisation.

As he famously declared: "Hide nothing from the masses of our people. Tell no lies. Expose lies whenever they are told. Mask no difficulties, mistakes, failures. Claim no easy victories."[27] Culture, for Cabral, was not folklore but the ground of political truth.

His praxis thus embodied three lessons that remain urgent for African research today. First, fieldwork and technical inquiry must be anchored in lived realities rather than abstract categories. Second, intellectuals must "return to the people" which means, above all, recognising them as producers of knowledge. Third, research must move from observation to action, from interpretation to transformation.

As Cabral reminded us, the colonised could see that the colonialist lived on a "lie," but it was necessary to confront that lie with truth.

Cabral was assassinated in 1973, just months before Guinea-Bissau's independence. Yet his legacy endures as both a method and an ethic.

> **"Hide nothing from the masses of our people. Tell no lies. Expose lies whenever they are told. Mask no difficulties, mistakes, failures. Claim no easy victories.**
>
> **Amilar Cabral**

The fifth foundational principle for African Social Research is that research must not only interpret the world but also engage it. It must be rooted in struggle, aligned with communities, and committed to liberation. Cabral reminds us that knowledge is never innocent. It either sustains domination or it becomes a weapon for freedom.

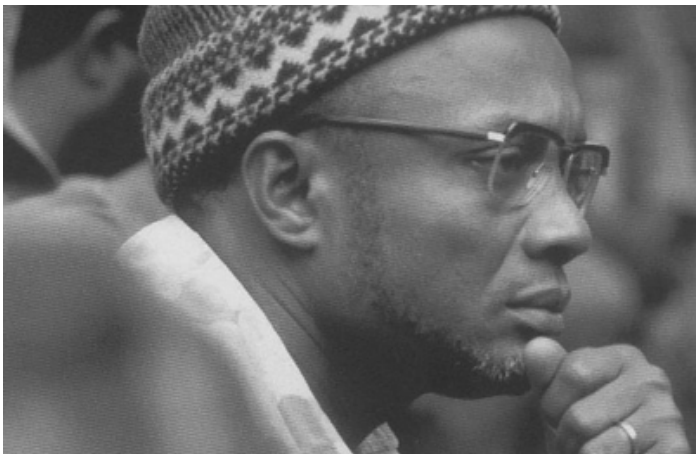

Figure 16: Amilcar Cabral
Source: *Flickr*

W.E.B. DuBois: the Split-Self and Epistemic Freedom

In 1899, W.E.B. DuBois published *The Philadelphia Negro,* the first major sociological study of an African American community. He carried out meticulous empirical research, doing door-to-door surveys, interviews, statistics, all while working under the shadow of scientific racism. But DuBois's intellectual trajectory cannot be reduced to The *Philadelphia Negro* (1899) or *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), even if these remain cornerstones. His early training at Harvard, Fisk, and especially Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Berlin exposed him to the methods of German historicism and sociology; he studied alongside figures such as Max Weber. His European formation sharpened his appreciation for empirical rigour but also revealed the hypocrisy of liberal modernity, which professed progress while sustaining empire.[28]

When DuBois returned to the United States, he was marginalised by white academia and forced into Black institutions like Atlanta University. There, he built the first sustained school of sociology in the U.S., namely the Atlanta School. From this base, he conducted wide-ranging empirical studies that made African American life visible against a backdrop of erasure.[29]

At a time when scientific racism dominated, DuBois insisted on a sociology that was empirical, methodological, and above all humanising. Yet he also grasped the limits of positivism, for data alone could not capture the psychic fracture produced by racism. In *The Souls of Black Folk (*1903), he therefore turned to the language of literature and prophecy to articulate "double consciousness", the painful awareness of always seeing oneself through the eyes of a racist society.[30]

This was not just a psychological dilemma but an epistemological condition, the cost of knowing the world from the margins, and a vantage point that could reveal truths about modernity hidden from those at the centre. DuBois's thought was never static. His political and theoretical commitments shifted across time, from early advocacy of a 'Talented Tenth' and cautious integrationism, to Pan-Africanism, socialism, and finally an embrace of Marxism.[31] Yet beneath these shifts lay a coherent concern to forge a connection between knowledge with liberation. For him, sociology could never be a neutral enterprise; it was invariably entangled in the very structures it sought to analyse. He pioneered what Michael Burawoy would later term critical sociology, a field of studies that is professional, policy-oriented, public-facing, and reflexive, blending rigorous scholarship with a commitment to social justice.[32]

Figure 17: W.E.B. DuBoisl
Source*: Flickr*

DuBois was also one of the earliest theorists of Pan-Africanism. From the Pan-African Conference of 1900 to the 1945 Manchester Congress, he argued that the colour line was not just an American problem but the problem of the twentieth century; it ran through Jim Crow, colonialism and capitalism worldwide.[33]

If his early work on the race question occupies pride of place within his intellectual corpus, it is his sustained engagement with the colonial question that both informs and extends these earlier insights, particularly in shaping a political-ideological framework capable of addressing the demands of both nationalist and anti-colonialist struggles. This global vision made DuBois a forerunner of anti-colonial nationalism, and his thinking influenced leaders across Africa and the diaspora.

His later works, such as *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), extended this vision by demonstrating how enslaved and freed Black people were central protagonists in both the creation and dissolution of American democracy.

At a time when scientific racism dominated, DuBois insisted on a sociology that was empirical, methodological, and above all humanising.

DuBois offers more than the concept of double consciousness. He exemplifies a model of intellectual practice in which rigorous method and radical imagination are fused, where the standpoint of the marginalised is not a limitation but a methodological strength. He rejected the false neutrality of early social science and insisted that research begin from the lives of those excluded. His lifelong conviction was that knowledge must serve emancipation, and that only by centering the experiences of the oppressed could sociology fulfil its democratic promise.

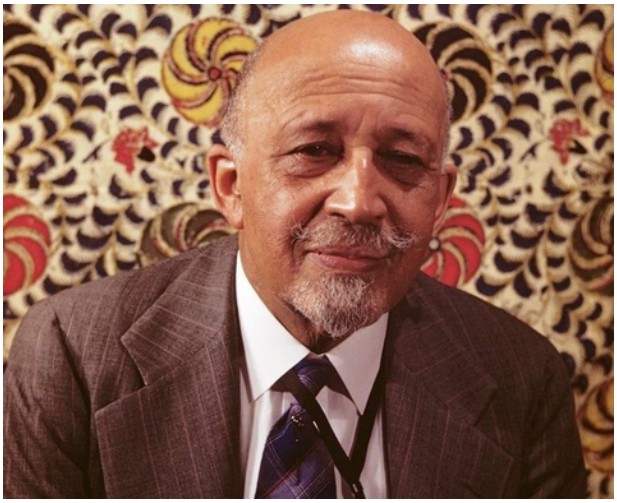

Figure 18: W.E.B. DuBois
Source: *AAIHS*

CONCLUSION

I wish to close with the story of Walter Benjamin's final days, which many of you may already know. In 1940, as Nazi forces swept across Europe, the German Jewish philosopher was in flight. His writings had been banned, his very existence criminalised by fascist antisemitism. With no country willing to grant him refuge, he fled Paris and attempted to cross the border into Spain, hoping to reach Lisbon and board a ship to the United States. In his suitcase, Benjamin carried one treasured possession, a manuscript he believed to be "more important than [his] own life." That manuscript was never recovered. What we know is that Benjamin died by suicide at the Spanish border, and that in his final days he was still striving to preserve thought, to safeguard truth, even as the world collapsed around him.

Benjamin's story is both tragic and profoundly illuminating. It reminds us that genuine knowledge is never only a profession; it is a lifeline, a form of resistance, and a vessel of memory. It embodies a defiant refusal to let oppressive regimes dictate what is remembered or erased. For Africa and its diaspora, this lesson is all too familiar. From the burning of libraries and suppression of oral traditions under colonialism to the exile of African scholars and the co-optation of knowledge systems, African thinkers too have carried ideas across borders, often at significant risk.

More radically still, African and diasporic thinkers have produced knowledge under conditions of rupture. For Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, an enduring crisis has been the crisis of language, the inability of colonial languages to carry African stories and sustain the African soul.

Just as Benjamin once seemed to ask, "what is it that must be preserved when all else stands under threat?" African thinkers, too, have grappled with similar questions. In this sense, Benjamin's suitcase resembles the commitments carried by the six African and diasporic thinkers above, who created works of profound insight under the historical, intellectual, and institutional strictures of their contexts.

Amílcar Cabral's political writings, carried through guerrilla camps and liberated zones, helped forge the cultural and political identity of a people. Sylvia Wynter's radical texts unsettled the categories of Western thought even when she was marginalised within mainstream academia. Wangari Maathai's trees stand as living archives of ecological knowledge and collective memory; Cheikh Anta Diop's historical and scientific arguments reclaimed African antiquity and placed the continent at the centre of human origins and civilisation. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's language of resistance, inscribed on prison walls and scraps of paper, upheld the sovereignty of African thought in an African tongue. And W.E.B. DuBois's theory of double consciousness, forged in the crucible of contradiction, illuminated the depth of Black insight under conditions of subjugation.

Together, these scholars embody distinct yet convergent traditions of knowledge, each committed to reimagining the world from within struggle. They are six different historical touchpoints, six exemplars of what it means to think in turbulent times. Each held fast to their own 'manuscript,' their truths, their language, their vision. They created under colonialism, patriarchy, exile, imprisonment, epistemicide, and ecological crisis, not merely to describe the world but to reimagine it, and to act upon it.

Benjamin's story therefore presses a question that resonates even more urgently in the African context today "what truths are we willing to carry when the weight of forgetting is so heavy?" From these thinkers, we inherit not just lessons but foundational principles for the present and the future of African knowledge production.

To juxtapose these thinkers is to demonstrate that their visions of Africa did not originate from some hidden reservoir of wisdom accessible only to a select few. Instead, they amplified intellectual and political currents already stirring in their time. They gathered scattered fragments into coherence, made visible what had been latent, and drew together entire epochs and collectivities around interests that they rendered audible and legible.

This also means that we must abandon the cult of the 'big-man' or oga-thinker, the notion that history turns on single heroic figures. No thinker has ever moved mountains alone. What matters are the alliances, experiences, movements, encounters, friendships, and trials that give shape to vision. To recall teleology is to remember that history has a collective sense. DuBois's double consciousness, for instance, is not simply a matter of binary perspective but a multiplicity of vantage points drawn from diverse experiences. It is a heuristic device that opens onto plural ways of seeing.

In this moment of ecological collapse, authoritarian resurgence, global disorder, moral decay, and epistemic theft, African research cannot be content merely to catch up; it must lead with creativity. It must honour its inherited traditions, both academic and ancestral, which fuse the wisdom of the past with visionary aspirations for a liberated future.

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