



# Agency, Possibilities, and Imagination: Countering Myths about Africa's Past

By Wangūi wa Kamonji



*"We die thirsting for knowledge, yet it is all around us."* — Saki Mafundikwa

In [Crazy Normal](#), Trevor Noah makes a joke about South Africa that I think applies to all of Africa. In his sketch, Africa responds to the world moving in one direction with, "Okay...we're going to go *that* way," pointing in a different direction. The 'rest-of-the-world' is perplexed and Africa reassures, "No, don't worry, we'll find you there."

What Trevor Noah illuminates is the 'elsewhere-ness' of Africa. Africa has impressive political, economic, social-ecological and cultural diversity - a diversity that is often un-understood for its defiance to being mappable by narrow Euro-American standards and statistics. So much so that Africa is today more often described in negatives than in anything else: *lack, poverty, failed, corrupt* and *crisis* being some of them.

But being elsewhere is not being nowhere. Studying Africa's history is sense-making of this reality and truth, especially for Africans who have [grown up in colonially inherited institutions](#), and are therefore at risk of reproducing an inherited scarcity mentality and inferiority complex. Engaging with precolonial and colonial African history is to remove inherited glasses, whose field of vision limits the scope of where and how 'being' is possible.

I discuss here three interlinked reasons for historical study of Africa: agency, possibility and imagination. Recognising Africans' agency allows recognition of the worlds Africans create/d and opens up imagination for the continued creation of African worlds. At a time of ecological, political, and socio-economic crisis, this is not just about reclaiming identity, but also about regaining footing to create and determine the new worlds coming.

## Agency

Africa's history has been human history for the 200,000 years that *homo sapiens* have been in existence. This makes African history the longest history of all the world. Precolonial African history makes up about 99.8 per cent of African history for the earliest colonised African entities, Madeira and Canary Islands (1420 and 1496, respectively), Kongo (1472) and South Africa (1652). Indeed, the term 'pre-colonial history' is a shorthand that centres European colonialism as Africa's defining feature, rather than the 99.8 per cent of history preceding it.

Locating Africans' agency through history counters the erroneous idea propagated by Western scholars that Africans [had no history prior to Europeans](#). Interrogating multiple archives, including documents, environments, materials, practices, language, oral history and more shows Africans in their full range of humanity, a beginning point from which one can ask questions about what happened in the past rather than making assumptions.

Reflecting on the history curriculum I learnt in high school, I noticed that there were gaps. Kenyan history was taught separately from 'world history', and in it, we learnt about some ethnic communities' cultural institutions; the Indian Ocean Trade emphasising Arab and Portuguese influence; and colonial encounters. Following the discussion of the local emergence of the *homo* species, history quickly propelled to a 'world' stage, represented by various linearly progressive revolutions: Neolithic-Agrarian-Industrial. These were described in a manner as to make one aspire to the ladder of progress they represented, but not to see what they left out - the [gender](#) and [class](#) stratifications and [colonialism and slavery](#), and their ripple effects on injustice in the world today.

The curriculum only returned to focus on the local when there were particular interactions with foreign entities, such as with Portuguese influence on the East African coast in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and with the later European colonisation of the African continent in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Between species evolution in East Africa hundreds of thousands to millions of years ago, and present-day Kenya, the only significant events taught had foreigners as the main characters: Arabs, Portuguese, British. Indigenous history was limited to an ahistorical view of some ethnic groups' customs.

Such gaps make significant processes, events, and local agents invisible in the history of what would later become Kenya, thus creating an incorrect view that only foreigners were and can be agents of Kenyan history. This negatively biases students' view of their own agency in affecting history, making it appear as though Africans 'froze' while history was happening elsewhere, and only re-entered history upon contact with foreigners.

This experience speaks to a larger institutionalisation of [silences](#) and misrepresentations. The bias is evident in policies and popular media that [undermine communities' indigenous livelihood strategies and knowledge](#), depicting them as destructive and in need of reform in the interests of 'development' and 'conservation' agendas, both of which are largely [driven by foreigners](#) and benefit a minority elite while harming a majority. These policies and narratives do not engage with indigenous histories to show the many ways in which Africans have been agents in engaging with and changing their environments with a variety of impacts, and not simply as passive responders.

They also don't engage with colonial history that would show how Africans' agency was hidden, diminished or skewed, and thus entrench denigrating and dangerous [received wisdoms](#). For example, in learning about the Perkerra Irrigation Scheme in school, no mention was made of it being inspired by an indigenous irrigation system by ilChamus peoples, nor was there a discussion of the reasons why ilChamus practised irrigation, how they managed to produce significant surpluses, and how and why they turned to other livelihood strategies, and with what effects. There was also no mention of the subsequent exclusion of ilChamus peoples from the 'modern' irrigation scheme when it was started.

Breaking the silence around indigenous Africans' agency through integrating precolonial history into institutions, such as schools and the media, in ways that do not fall into either essentialising or negative stereotyping would counter damaging racist bias that Africa was a blank slate awaiting discovery and awakening by Europeans, or a 'wrong' place awaiting correction by the same.

## **Possibilities**

In 2017, I studied permaculture, an environmental design-with-nature system articulated by the Australian Bill Mollison. The techniques and system, for which I was paying \$400 to learn, I later found out, are part of [a repertoire of indigenous agro-ecological techniques](#) and social ethics developed and practised in various parts of Africa and elsewhere. These origins were not acknowledged in the teaching, and fellow students, myself included, were enthused by the 'new' knowledge we were gaining.

In my exploration of ecological, economic and social restorative technologies, I encounter a number of these systems articulated by Westerners drawing on often unacknowledged and/or [unrematriated](#) indigenous knowledges and practices, including those from this continent. Permaculture, as already mentioned, [holistic rangeland management](#), a reformulation of pastoralists' ways of working with livestock, [family constellation therapy](#) drawn from Zulu family healing techniques, [bodywork techniques](#) in process-oriented psychology, some drawn from unnamed Giriama healers, and restorative justice circles celebrate their often white, often male 'inventors' and have courses you can pay good sums for to learn these technologies.

Colonisation infused with '[scientific racism](#)' placed Africans at the bottom of a ladder of humanity. It was unthinkable that Africans accomplished anything remarkable or constructive. This ladder perpetuated the myth that Africans don't know and must be taught. Our knowledge and technologies are repackaged elsewhere and sold back to us at a premium, and we don't recognise them. A permaculture practitioner I met in Tanzania, for example, confidently told a room of American undergraduates that there were no sustainable indigenous African food growing techniques except in her Chagga community. As Saki Mafundikwa comments, "We die thirsting for knowledge, yet it is all around us."

By bringing agency and possibilities together, studying African history can reclaim our humanity and world-making over 200,000 years of living. Tracing past creativity, innovation, technologies, and their lifeworlds re-presents innumerable possibilities of being and doing. Importantly, it helps Africans step outside of disadvantageous psychological, economic and technological dependency.

Histories of indigenous food provision illuminate the variety of technological skills, and knowledge-based practices in use in different parts of Africa, how these developed, and where they were curtailed by colonial officers, thus hampering their efficacy. Looking only at agriculture, indigenous irrigation technologies, such as dams and irrigation canals, were/are in use in [Marakwet](#), [Pokot](#), [Baringo](#), and at [Engaruka](#) in East Africa for many decades if not centuries.

Other forms of water management, including mulching, cover cropping, pit planting, terracing and [weather manipulation](#), were in use across the continent, as were fertility technologies to manipulate soil chemistry, such as burning and tilling in of weeds and crop residues, creating areas of high fertility [dark earths](#), using animal manure, and managing insects such as termites. Practices such as mobility, fallowing, and cultivating or encouraging a diverse range of plants and plant varieties harnessed land and climate variability. The latter also selected plants for taste, maturation, ritual suitability, colour, drought and pest tolerance, effectively making indigenous African farmers crop scientists par excellence.

Social-ecological innovations, like building partnerships across livelihoods to harness symbiotic benefits, were also food provision innovations. There are several examples of pastoralist-cultivators-forager partnerships, such as between the Maa-Agikuyu and Mukogodo-Maa peoples in East Africa, and [Bambara-Fula and Bambara-Maure](#) peoples in West Africa. Interrogating the development, context, and practice of these and more food provision technologies would illuminate useful knowledge for continued innovation. Histories of food provision would also include pastoralism and foraging, which are marginalised in popular and political discourse, perhaps because they are less easily dominated by capitalist commercialisation for export and state benefit.

Archaeological research indicates the depth of indigenous sciences knowledge in various parts of Africa. The bronze sculptures of [Igbo-Ukwu](#) that were created using the lost-wax technique and dating prior to 1000 AC (after Christ) are unique for their age, fine pattern detailing and technological skill. Similarly, Africans independently developed a [wide range of iron smelting techniques](#) (more diverse than anywhere else in the world) – including some unique in the temperatures they achieved – invented in central Africa at least [4,000 years ago](#). That indigenous African technologies, such as pyramid building in Kemet and Nubia, are yet to be deciphered, are a testament to their depth of skill and innovation. The presence of such sciences counters the received wisdoms that there is nothing to show for Africa in terms of indigenous innovation.

Remarkable [rock art](#) is found in many African countries. These art forms were created using a variety of techniques and intents. Rock art also informs historical understanding of [human movements](#). Saharan rock art [from a wetter period](#) than the present indicates the likelihood that Kemet (Ancient Egypt) was formed from people migrating from a drying Sahara. Rock paintings and a 100,000-year-old [paint laboratory](#) in southern Africa demonstrate the manipulation of various materials (including ochre, blood, egg yolk, shells, bone marrow and fats) to create different coloured paints, and the development of varied [painting techniques](#), including fine line brush paintings, finger, and hand paintings, and the use of art to depict and [enact complex cosmologies](#) and [healing arts](#).

The diverse ways in which Africans made worlds are openings for diverse ways of being and for understanding Africa's technological legacy. They are also a basis for the imagination of alternatives to the present moment.

## **Imagination**

Africa's colonisation ushered in a period of global homogeneity that solidified a global political (the [nation-state](#)) and economic ([capitalism](#)) template that has so dominated the global imaginary of the following 150 years that it seems nearly impossible to imagine alternatives to it. This has come with [grave consequences](#), including the [climate crisis](#) we in Africa are increasingly going to bear the brunt of. Pre-independence African history is a key to breaking the totalising nature and lure of the present moment.

Studying pre-colonial and colonial history enables understanding of how the world's narrative came



to occlude Africa's abilities and possibilities, and how this continues into the present. Looking at this history by focusing on agency and possibilities makes one realise that Africa's pasts are not 'less than' but [a resource to be built on](#).

Formal schooling, which focuses mainly on Africa's post-independence history, can lead to feelings of impotence and resignation that make one believe that that is how things are in the present are how they will forever be. Engaging the 99.8 per cent of African history to know that things *can* be different - that as an African one is an agent, and that there is no dearth of examples of knowledge and skills from Africa - allows one to imagine something else in the present, and to "dare to invent the future", as Thomas Sankara challenged.

Breaking the lure of the present moment involves countering the notion of African timelessness through attending to change in our pasts. For example, though we are often presented with African traditions as though they have been static, we know that practices are fashioned to respond to the goals of a group of people, and that both goals and practices can change. For example, many Bantu communities moving into eastern and southern parts of the continent did not practise circumcision as part of their rites of passage for young people coming of age. Circumcision was added onto pre-existing practices that varyingly included seclusion, adorning the body with clay and other emollients, ancestral and nature rituals, instruction from family, clan or community elders on new life responsibilities in adulthood, and the celebration of successful passage. Circumcision was added to pre-existing rites often as a result of mixing with non-Bantu communities who practised this, possibly due to, or to enable, intermarriages. Using analysis of divergences in words and ideas, historians show how even this inclusion [waxed and waned](#) with increasing and decreasing contacts with other communities.

Indigenous history provides an arena to destabilise European Enlightenment divides such as nature-culture, mind-body disciplines, and anthropocentric notions of agency, all colonial inheritances that continue to define the present and contribute to the ongoing crisis. The practice of acknowledging those who came first, including land and forest spirits, is common in various African communities. When [Anlo-Ewe peoples](#) migrated into lagoon areas in West Africa, they incorporated ritual knowledge and the sea deities of neighbouring peoples, thus enabling them to develop a maritime fishing tradition, which was previously non-existent amongst them.

African symbologies, syllabaries and alphabets, such as Adinkra, Nsibidi, Chokwe veves, and Ge'ez scripts, illuminate communities' values as well as the design and communication principles used to communicate them. These carriers of peoples' aesthetic thought and principles can be used today both as reminders and harbingers of alternative futures, as [Saki Mafundikwa](#), a graphic designer, and [Nnedi Okorafor](#), a science fiction author, are doing.

Breaking the lure of the present moment also entails complexifying grand narratives through attending to histories of the particular and of change. For example, Sundiata Keita is famed as a great ruler of the Mali Empire. [A charter](#) he pronounced upon ascending the throne is celebrated as one of the first 'constitutions' in the world, [contemporaneous with the Magna Carta](#), and lauded for its humaneness because it instructed that slaves should get one day off a week and own the property of their bags. Sundiata, in fact, reinstated slavery, which the guild of hunters had abolished a few years earlier in [a charter](#) they delivered. This history points to the fact that life, and therefore history, is processual and encourages a shift from linear progression and teleological thinking.

Indigenous African polities demonstrate heterarchy as a form of societal organisation in which power is diffuse and vested in multiple spheres and people, none more important than the other, thus entrenching checks and balances. One person could belong to their family or clan lineage, an age-set group, a secret society, a knowledge or crafts guild, a deliberative body (e.g. council of

elders), and a spiritual practice (e.g. a spirit medium or devotee) at the same time. Each of these institutions performed activities necessary for the health of the whole community rather than for the importance of single individuals, be they chiefs or kings. Amongst the [Nanumba](#) and others, chiefs were farmers like any other community member. Equally, deposition of leaders when they did not meet the reciprocal obligation to work for the health of the community was practised, as were migrations to start new communities in new areas.

Among the [Alur](#), the power of the central polity increased rather than decreased as groups separated and left to start their own political formations. The [hunter's charter](#) and 'egalitarian/stateless societies' like the Igbo of West Africa also provide examples of alternative political models. These different ways of organising the political can open up a discursive and praxis imaginary of the political that goes [beyond the nation-state](#).

In many indigenous African societies, people, relationships and the knowledge embedded in them were more valued than material goods. The global capital system, however, has steadily [devalued people](#), especially knowledgeable Africans who are placed at the bottom of a hierarchy, even while the system profits off the knowledge they hold in [agriculture](#), [medicine](#), [knowledge production](#), and various other domains. In [Equatorial Africa](#) how much knowledge one had, understood as skilful generative action (not information) was highly valued. At present, however, extractive control over people, and the Earth, not the ownership of knowledge (productive skilful action) is what is more highly valued. A reframing of wealth using indigenous concepts of knowledge and skill might change how we organise our economies and societies, re-appreciating both the time and knowledge inherent in agroecological food production, craftwork, and forms of artistic production. It can also provide pathways out of global capitalism.

Statistics about Africa's rapid urbanisation abound. Valuing and integrating indigenous forms of urbanism might hold answers to the challenges this presents. For example, urban agriculture was an integral part of several [indigenous urban centres](#). Encouraging and supporting urban agriculture in African cities today might allow us to create cities that feed themselves. The floating city of Makoko in Lagos lagoon was settled [200 years ago](#). Today the ingenuity of design, construction, and socio-economic life in Makoko is under [threat of demolition](#) for 'development'. A historical understanding of living in Makoko, coupled with an appreciation of the layers of knowledge and skill represented might allow imagination of indigenous urban development. Indeed, the residents of Makoko have been innovating it for 200 years already.

## **Conclusion**

Tracing African pasts through the interlinked lenses of agency, possibility and imagination allows us to counter-narratives of Africa as a blank slate, to challenge the privileging of whiteness and Europeanness, and to debunk myths about Africans as people who are destructive or unchanging. It allows us to illuminate diverse possibilities of human living to build on against the hegemony of a present moment that unsees and devalues us. For Africans, studying African history is an opportunity to trace the stream of African living for the last 200, 000 years.

Unseeing was a colonial predicament. There is no reason why we must continue with these glasses on.

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