



# ‘Europe is Not My Center’: Traditional Art Forms as a Means of Narrative Reappropriation in Africa Through Decoloniality

Zahra Hassan Doualeh

Edited by : Mohammed Abdulganiyu & Isabelle Lim

Art has long been a central element of African tradition and culture, serving as a tool of expression and transmission. It can be used to reflect on popular sentiments and relive historical events. Many African societies and cultures prioritize visual or oral art forms such as poetry, film, and music. This can be attributed to longstanding oral traditions that precede modern times and to artists like Ousmane Sembène, who vowed to democratize art and present it in a way all Africans could consume, regardless of literacy. Sembène was not the only one, as Schumann highlights a similar trend in South Africa: “Oral communication also has been much more accessible to a large part of the South African population than the printed press due to lack of literacy and economic means (for which the apartheid system was of course partly responsible).” (2008, p.18).

Colonial efforts decentralized and de-legitimized oral culture, traditions, and knowledge by imposing Eurocentric forms of teaching and controlling the material taught at colonial schools (Eizadirad & Wane, 2023). In a way, the practice of oral traditions and visual art represents a decolonial approach to knowledge by centering indigenous methods.

African artists have been using their art as a tool to combat colonial forces and oppression throughout history. Whether it be Somali oral poetry used to express grievances against the British and Italian colonization

or Miriam Makeba, also known as Mama Africa, denouncing the apartheid regime in South Africa, the use of cultural media to convey political messages is present across the continent.

This essay will argue that African oral and visual arts mobilize political resistance, renew cultural pride, and envision postcolonial futures, reshaping African identities in a globalized world. Activism through African art will be analyzed on the continent and within the diaspora through a decolonial lens, as such promotes the centering of narratives around Africa and the rewriting of history in a more representative manner (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). I will be referencing various artists, their philosophies and work and how they relate to art as a tool for resistance, the reappropriation of narrative and the reshaping of identity in a globalized world.

### **Poetry And Oral Tradition As Tools For Resistance**

Somalia has been referred to as the “nation poets” because of its rich tradition of oral poetry. Poetry is used to convey messages and communicate discourses on morality, society, and cultural identity. According to Samatar, Somali poets can be political manipulators as their words have the power to discredit or support politicians, making them central to political life. Sayyid Mohammed Abdille Hassan is a prominent example of this. His oral performance of

poetry in the late 20th century sought to target French, British and Italian forces occupying Somali territory in line with Dervish efforts, the resistance movement Sayyid founded. Most notably, Sayyid used gabay, a traditional style of poem, to convey complex ideas through short lines packed with meaning that form a big picture once assembled (Samatar 85). He touched on topics ranging from faith to anti-colonial struggle (Ba 107). In this manner, he built an aura of charisma, which solidified his role as a resistance movement leader against colonial forces. Sayyid's work exemplifies the power of oral tradition as a tool to channel popular discontent, public persuasion, and mobilization.

In parallel to the gabay style exists buraanbur, a specific type of Somali poetry reserved for women (Aidid, 2020). Poems in that style are often performed in groups, with one woman usually in charge of the drums, another woman reciting or singing the verses, and other women congregating in the center. It is a communal performance allowing Somali women to express their grievances, anger, and frustrations associated with living in a patriarchal society. It is notable for being a gendered kind of art form, allowing women to articulate their experiences and works as a tool for resistance and healing (Aidid, 2020). Somali poetry is not functionally limited to being a passively consumed art form; rather, its role transcends the public and private spheres. Buraanbur provides an example of how

women's decolonial activism is embedded in oral tradition as a cultural expression of public discourse.

Similarly, on the other side of the continent, artists such as the South African Mazisi Kunene produced work deeply embedded in their oral tradition. Kunene's poetry was deeply embedded in Zulu tradition, as observable through his characteristic style of praise songs common in Zulu prose and oral poetry (Okoro, 2023). According to him, African identity can be reaffirmed and reconstructed through poetry, encouraging African poets to "go back to the source" and turn towards the ancestral wisdom contained in their traditions. Kunene draws on fables and myths to elevate African knowledge, centering his own culture in his art (Okoro, 2023). This decolonial practice takes the spotlight away from colonially transmitted knowledge and the colonial tendency to denigrate African belief systems. Mazisi Kunene was known for discussing the realities and struggles of his people, both past and present, thus positioning himself as a socially engaged artist. Kunene's commitment to social justice was not just limited to his art; in fact, he was also involved in the African National Congress (ANC) before his forced exile from South Africa due to his political activism (Okoro 36). The poet's persistence in writing in African languages and revisiting his oral traditions elevated African cultures and reclaimed the richness and complexity of African identity, therefore challenging

colonial denigration.

Léopold Sédar Senghor embodied the same concepts of rejuvenated African identity and cultural pride through his advancement of the idea of Negritude. This philosophy serves as a critique of colonial domination and a powerful celebration of African identity. Mustapha Bal highlighted the relevance of the concept of Negritude by qualifying it as a “childhood of black poetry” (Ba 159). Negritude is also described as a style of literature characterized not by words but the emotion and the cultural nuances utilized by the author (Ba 166). Léopold Sédar Senghor viewed the creative arts of the Black world, as expressed through Negritude, as a means to both address global challenges and showcase African ingenuity. He believed that embracing Negritude ideals—rooted in cultural identity and humanistic values—could foster a reconciliation between human nature and modern civilization.

He also maintained that interacting with African cultural paradigms could help the West regain its humanity and promote intercultural harmony (Ba 157). This concept promotes cultural regeneration and global understanding via an African lens, placing African artistic expression—including poetry and oral traditions—at the center of the decolonial movement.

In the work *Nocturnes*, the poet emphasizes his commitment to African activism by

stating that he would “die for [his] people’s cause” and urging his people to name him their ambassador (Ba 152). This figure of speech conveys Senghor’s deep sense of responsibility to speak on behalf of his people. Despite his goal to write for his community, his position as a writer rendered his work inaccessible for the illiterate peasant he claimed to represent. However, his literary work exemplifies a desire for all-encompassing solidarity, including that with the French colonizing force of his native Senegal.

### **Reclaiming The Narrative Through Film And Music**

Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène was a key figure in African cinema, choosing only to make films on Africa and its people. He infamously said, “Europe is not my center,” when asked if he thought his films were well received in Europe. According to Sembène, Europe is a periphery of Africa, the same way it was conceived by colonial powers. His body of work is therefore representative of a typically decolonial style. Ousmane Sembène’s 1996 movie, entitled *La Noire De...* [The Black Girl] contains all the characteristics of an African-centered piece.

The audience follows a young Senegalese lady, Diouana, from a first-person point of view as she follows her employers, a white married couple and their three children, when they return back to France after

living in Dakar (Sembène). Diouana feels betrayed by her employer (only referred to as ‘Madame’) as Diouana was initially only hired to take care of the children, but was instead forced to take on additional roles like cleaning, cooking, doing the laundry and serving as an exotic attraction for the couple’s guests. Sembène depicts a character who is aware of her oppression and actively fights it through little acts of rebellion. The story is narrated through Diouana’s internal monologue as she questions her purpose in France and critiques the couple she lives with, feeling like a prisoner away from her family. Although her thoughts are simple in the beginning, she becomes increasingly angry as the story evolves as a result of her mistreatment, which affects her psychologically and emotionally. When the husband, ‘Monsieur,’ offers to help her write to her mother, he starts writing the response by himself, literally taking control of Diouana’s narrative and writing about her life in France from his perspective, pretending to be her (Sembène).

Here, the filmmaker makes a parallel between his protagonist’s story and the colonial erasure of the realities of the colonial era and atrocities committed by Europeans in Africa; in other words, the rewriting of history. Ousmane Sembène, through his art, deals with themes of African resistance in the diaspora, overt rebellion, the white-washing of history, and deep diasporic self-awareness, all while centring African identity in his narrative.

The call for resistance against oppression reverberated across the continent, as Anti-apartheid artist Miriam Makeba also denounced the apartheid regime in her native South Africa. Mama Africa, as she was nicknamed, sang in Zulu, Arabic, and Xhosa, centering African languages as a key feature of her art and her performance (Nicholls, 2018). The song *Jolinkomo*, released in 1967, hints at the singer’s protective attitude towards her people’s grievances (Nicholls 52). The introduction is done in English, and then Makeba slowly introduces lyrics in the vernacular of IsiXhosa, seemingly reserving the song’s true meaning for her African audience. Makeba stages *Jolinkomo* as a war song, praising warriors about to go into combat through her lyrics (Nicholls, 2018). This traditional style of Xhosa oral culture with a modern twist represents a blend of old and new, representing the realities of black Africans under the apartheid regime. For that, *Jolinkomo* is considered an anti-apartheid mobilization song, exemplifying the power of art as a tool for activism and political mobilization. By blending traditional Xhosa oral culture with modern performance, Makeba crafted a song that resonated as both a rallying cry against apartheid and a celebration of African identity. Through her use of African languages and cultural symbolism, she reclaimed the narrative of resistance, empowering her people and asserting the enduring relevance of African traditions in the fight for liberation.

**Reshaping African Identities in a Globalized World**

Warsan Shire is a British Somali poet known to skillfully blend modern and traditional techniques in her performance and writing. Her poems reflect the diasporic realities of those perpetually living in exile. Shire sets herself apart by foregoing the taboos and limits of the diasporic narrative and exploiting themes of sexuality and ambivalence in her poems (Souney 11). The African diasporic discourse replicates itself across the world, and Shire is not exempt from it. She knows Somalia only through her parents, yet paints it in an idealized manner. When interviewed on the topic, Warsan Shire admits to picturing herself in the golden age of Somalia when writing. This follows a decolonial movement of reclaiming Africa's image for oneself by consciously straying away from the mainstream colonial perception of Africa as a barren land.

Through imagery, Warsan Shire evokes the discomfort of refugees in seeing their experiences mirrored on a global scale. The line "All of my children are in the water. I thought the sea was safer than the land" expresses the harshness of a world consumed by ever-raging wars (Souney 178). Here, Shire expresses the African diasporic identity as affected by a globalized world. The author reaffirms her own Somalimimo, or the essence of being Somali, using the vivid metaphor of her narrator swallow-

ing their own passport (Souney 180). Africanness, Somalimimo in her case, has become greater than symbolic document, but rather a place one knows. The definition of African identity is expanded by including experiences, language, feelings, and backgrounds over legal status. Warsan Shire's poetry reflects a greater concept of African diaspora and their intersecting national identities, between home country and motherland.

Diasporic awareness is also explored in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah*, where modern and traditional modes of self-perception are reaffirmed through their locality. The story follows a protagonist who immigrates to America from Nigeria. Her journey of cultural adaptation and acceptance of her new Black identity in America is expressed through her relationship with her hair. Hair and hairstyles are a significant part of African cultures; since the 15th century, West African tribal groups have used hair to convey sex, tribe affiliation, age, or vocation (Cruz-Gutierrez .67). As such, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* highlights art and literature as powerful tools for activism by exploring diasporic awareness and the reclamation of African identity. The protagonist's relationship with her hair serves as a symbol of rejecting Eurocentric beauty standards and embracing cultural authenticity. By weaving themes of decoloniality into narratives of migration and self-perception, Adichie uses storytelling

to challenge oppression and foster pride in African heritage within a globalized world.

In conclusion, African cultural production through traditional art forms serves as a powerful mechanism for decolonial activism. These forms—poetry, oral traditions, film, and music—mobilize resistance, renew cultural pride, and strengthen attachments to identity. They address contemporary challenges such as globalization and identity crises by reaffirming the transformative power of art to reclaim African histories, challenge colonial legacies, and envision postcolonial futures. This ongoing decolonial movement emphasizes the importance of thought, image, narrative, and language as integral tools for reshaping African identities in a globalized world. The decolonial impact of African cultural production is significantly amplified through intersections of various art forms.

#### Works Cited

Aidid, Safia. "Women in Somalia." Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History, 31 Mar. 2020, [oxfordre.com/africanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-518](https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-518). Accessed 7 Dec. 2024.

Bâ, Sylvia Washington. *The Concept of Negritude in the Poetry of Leopold Sedar Senghor*. Princeton University Press, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400867134>.

Barnes, Cedric. "Gubo - Ogaadeen Poetry and the Aftermath of the Dervish Wars." *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2006, pp. 105–17. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25473359>. Accessed 29 Mar. 2025.

Eizadirad, Ardavan, and Njoki N. Wane. *The Power of Oral Culture in Education: Theorizing Proverbs, Idioms, and Folklore Tales*. Springer International Publishing, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-18537-3>.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. "Decoloniality as the Future of Africa." *History Compass*, vol. 13, no. 10, 2015, pp. 485–96, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12251>.

Nicholls, Brett. "Decolonization and Popular Poetics: From Soweto Poetry to Diasporic Solidarity." *English in Africa*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2018, pp. 41–78, <https://doi.org/10.4314/eia.v45i3.3>.

Samatar, Said S. *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism: The Case of Sayid Muhammad 'Abdille Hasan*. Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Schumann, Anne. "The Beat That Beat Apartheid: The Role of Music in the Resistance Against Apartheid in South Africa." *Stichproben - Vienna Journal of African Studies*, vol. 8, no. 14, 2018, p. 18, <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:160953023>.

Sembène, Ousmane, director. *La Noire De...* New Yorker Films, 1996.