



Indigenous Knowledge and the Excluded Public Sphere: A Communication Studies Perspective on Africa's Decolonization

Namubiru-Auma, R. H

Uganda Christian University, P.O. Box 4, Mukono, Uganda

Corresponding Author Email: rachealhna@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how historical and ongoing linguistic marginalization in Africa structurally excludes large segments of the population from participating in the communicative arenas where knowledge is validated, circulated, and commercialized. Anchored in a decolonial communication framework, the analysis draws on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's critique of linguistic imperialism. It interrogates the applicability of Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere within African contexts. It argues that the dominance of colonial languages in formal communication, particularly in policy, education, and media, restricts access to epistemic legitimacy and perpetuates uneven development discourse, favoring elite, and exogenous paradigms. This exclusion constrains the dissemination of indigenous knowledge, which is often embedded in oral and communal communication practices, and hinders its equitable commercialization. Indigenous Knowledge (IK) refers to the local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. It is often passed down through generations and involves traditional practices and beliefs. It is inherently "indigenous" to a place and people. Using a critical synthesis of Communication Studies literature, the paper examines how language policies and the structure of digital platforms shape inclusion and exclusion in contemporary African public spheres. It highlights the structural barriers that limit the integration of IK into mainstream development narratives and market systems. The paper concludes by arguing that reconfiguring communicative ecologies to be linguistically and culturally pluralistic is a requisite for advancing epistemic justice and advancing inclusive, knowledge-based development across the continent.

Keywords: Africa, Communication, Decolonization, Digital Media, Epistemic Justice, Indigenous Knowledge, Language Policy, Linguistic Imperialism, Public Sphere

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine comment la marginalisation linguistique historique et persistante en Afrique exclut structurellement une large partie de la population des espaces de communication où le savoir est validé, diffusé et commercialisé. Ancrée dans un cadre de communication décolonial, l'analyse s'appuie sur la critique de Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o concernant l'impérialisme linguistique. Elle interroge la pertinence du concept d'espace public de Jürgen Habermas dans les contextes africains. L'article soutient que la domination des langues coloniales dans la communication formelle, en particulier dans les politiques, l'éducation et les médias, restreint l'accès à la légitimité épistémique et perpétue un discours de développement déséquilibré, favorisant des paradigmes élitistes et exogènes. Cette exclusion entrave la diffusion des savoirs indigènes, souvent transmis oralement et collectivement, et compromet leur commercialisation équitable. Le savoir indigène (SI) désigne les connaissances locales propres à une culture ou une société donnée. Il est généralement transmis de génération en génération et repose sur des pratiques et croyances traditionnelles. Il est intrinsèquement « indigène » à un lieu et un peuple. En utilisant une synthèse critique de la littérature en sciences de la communication, l'article examine comment les politiques linguistiques et la structure des plateformes numériques influencent l'inclusion ou l'exclusion dans les sphères publiques africaines contemporaines. Il met en évidence les obstacles structurels qui limitent l'intégration du SI dans les récits dominants du développement et les systèmes de marché. L'article conclut en affirmant que reconfigurer les écologies communicationnelles pour qu'elles soient linguistiquement et culturellement pluralistes est une condition nécessaire pour faire progresser la justice épistémique et promouvoir un développement inclusif fondé sur le savoir à travers le continent.

Mots clés : Afrique, Communication, Décolonisation, Médias numériques, Justice épistémique, Savoir indigène, Politique linguistique, Impérialisme linguistique, Espace public

INTRODUCTION

Communication Studies offers an indispensable lens through which to interrogate the intersections of language, power, and epistemic access in the formation and circulation of knowledge. Nowhere is this more urgent than in postcolonial Africa, where enduring colonial linguistic infrastructures continue to delimit who can speak, be heard, and be deemed credible within formal knowledge economies. European languages, especially English, French, and Portuguese, remain disproportionately dominant in education, scientific discourse, media, and policymaking, thereby naturalizing exclusion and stratification within the very structures intended to advance civic participation and intellectual innovation (Dladla, 2017; Abdu, 2023;).

This paper hypothesizes the concept of the *excluded public sphere*, a communicative regime in which linguistic capital becomes a primary mechanism for controlling access to epistemic authority and socio-economic mobility. Building on the decolonial perception of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), who exposes the cultural violence of linguistic imperialism, and Jürgen Habermas's normative theory of the public sphere as a domain for inclusive rational-critical discourse (Habermas, 1989), this paper examines how African linguistic marginality constitutes both a symptom and a cause of structural inequality in the global knowledge economy. Ngũgĩ's intervention situates language as the site of both colonization and resistance, demanding a return to African languages as mediums of intellectual and political

sovereignty. Habermas, while writing from a Eurocentric vantage, nevertheless provides a framework for evaluating the procedural exclusions that compromise deliberative legitimacy. When juxtaposed, these two paradigms explain how epistemic disqualification is perpetuated through communicative infrastructures and how such exclusion might be conceptually and materially dismantled. These theoretical claims are grounded in empirical cases that expose the material consequences of linguistic marginalization. In Uganda, community radio stations broadcasting in indigenous languages such as Luganda, Luo, and Runyakitara have improved access to development information in rural communities, particularly in health education, agricultural innovation, and civic awareness (Farm Radio International, 2023; URDT, n.d.). Yet these contributions remain largely invisible in national policy arenas, where English continues to function as the lingua franca of legitimacy (Abdu, 2023), a phenomenon that arises in the sidelining of indigenous-language media and in institutional practices such as parliamentary debates conducted solely in English which excludes large segments of the population from meaningful political participation and the very electorate they are meant to serve (McLaughlin, 2009). The exclusion is not merely linguistic but epistemological; local-language knowledge, despite its efficacy and reach, is routinely treated as subaltern.

Similarly, in Ghana, efforts to commercialize traditional herbal medicine, rooted in centuries of indigenous knowledge, have faced systemic obstacles due to biomedical paradigms that privilege documentation, scientific trials, and institutional validation conducted in English (Sarfo *et al*, 2023; Dako-Gyeke *et al*, 2022). A parallel phenomenon is observable in Uganda,

where the challenges faced by the developers of traditional remedies, such as the widely discussed Covidex during the COVID-19 pandemic, stress the friction between local epistemologies of healing and dominant regulatory frameworks that demand specific Western-oriented scientific verification and communicative protocols (Kasozi, 2021). The challenge is not the lack of value in indigenous remedies, but rather the communicative protocols through which value is recognized, codified, and rendered market-legible. Nevertheless, some African nations are actively working to bridge this gap; for instance, Nigeria has exhibited measurable efforts towards formalizing and integrating traditional medicine into its conventional healthcare delivery system, particularly through the establishment of relevant policies and research bodies (Egharevba *et al*., 2015). As the World Health Organization (2023) notes, even policy frameworks designed to integrate traditional medicine often lack sufficient linguistic and cultural scaffolding to engage IK systems on their terms.

Together, these cases illustrate a broader contradiction; communication systems in Africa, whether legacy or digital, are either complicit in epistemic exclusion or represent underleveraged tools for its reversal. The persistence of colonial language dominance narrows the epistemic bandwidth of public discourse and stunts the potential for inclusive innovation and sustainable development.

This paper pursues three interrelated objectives: To theorize the dynamics of an excluded public sphere in Africa by tracing how colonial language hierarchies and entrenched linguistic gatekeeping restrict participation in the formal knowledge

economy and shape communicative infrastructures across education, media, and governance.

To examine how language policy and digital platforms either reinforce or disrupt communicative exclusion, particularly in hindering the commercialization of Indigenous Knowledge from dominant linguistic-epistemic systems.

To argue that reimagining Africa's public sphere through the lenses of linguistic and epistemic justice is essential to building a truly inclusive knowledge society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LINGUISTIC MARGINALIZATION AND THE EXCLUDED PUBLIC SPHERE. To understand the structural barriers to knowledge transfer and commercialization in Africa, an interrogation of the interplay between language, epistemic legitimacy, and public discourse is essential. This section draws from three key theoretical traditions: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's critique of linguistic imperialism, Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere, and African Communication Studies' analysis of information systems. Together, they illuminate how language functions as a gatekeeping mechanism, determining who speaks, who hears, what they hear, who is heard, and whose knowledge counts.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o: Language as a Technology of Epistemic Displacement. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (Ngũgĩ, 1986) remains a landmark work in postcolonial thought, particularly for its indictment of colonial language policy. Ngũgĩ argues that colonial education systems imposed European languages not simply as means of communication but as tools of cultural domination: "The domination of a people's

language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised" (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 16). In his view, language does not merely reflect reality. It constructs it.

This imposition severed African writers, thinkers, and students from their own communities and intellectual traditions. In privileging English over Gikuyu, for example, Ngũgĩ recounts how he had to "abandon the spoken word to embrace the written" (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 11), and how this shift signaled a deeper psychological alienation from indigenous knowledge systems. Such linguistic alienation, Ngũgĩ contends, institutionalizes epistemic inequality. Knowledge expressed in African languages is relegated to the informal or anecdotal, while the knowledge articulated in colonial languages is codified, archived, and legitimized. The implications for knowledge transfer and commercialization are profound; if innovation must be expressed in Europhone terms to be recognized, then indigenous epistemologies remain structurally invisible.

Jürgen Habermas: The Public Sphere and Communicative Inequality Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) provides a conceptual lens through which to examine discursive exclusion. The public sphere, as Habermas defines it, is "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" through rational-critical debate (Habermas, 1989, p. 102). It is a normative ideal of participatory democracy in which all citizens have equal access to discourse and deliberation.

Yet, Habermas also warns that real public spheres can be "colonized" by power interests, leading to communicative distortion (Habermas, 1987). In

the African context, this colonization is often linguistic. Formal arenas of policy-making, science, law, and media are dominated by colonial languages, which function as gatekeepers of participation. This is particularly evident in parliamentary debates conducted solely in English, or in legal discourse surrounding a constitution often written in specialized, Latin-oriented English, leading to the linguistic divide that restricts democratic participation and perpetuates elite closure (McLaughlin, 2009). Consequently, those who primarily communicate in African languages are systemically excluded from shaping public discourse, policy agendas, or knowledge economies. This results in what we may term an *excluded public sphere*: a configuration in which access to deliberative arenas is predicated on linguistic fluency in European languages, thus undermining the democratic ideals that the public sphere purports to uphold.

While Habermas's public sphere theory provides a powerful analytical lens, critiques from scholars like Nancy Fraser offer important refinements. Fraser (1990) argues for the recognition of subaltern counterpublics, alternative discursive arenas formed by marginalized groups to formulate oppositional interpretations. This perspective highlights the vibrancy of informal knowledge spaces in Africa, often overlooked in state discourse. In Uganda, examples of such counter publics are evident in the work of community-based organizations promoting indigenous farming methods through local languages, or in traditional cultural institutions that serve as platforms for communal deliberation and the transmission of knowledge outside formal governmental channels (Civicus, 2006). In addition, Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity offers a useful lens for understanding

how indigenous and colonial languages intersect in dynamic and contested ways during knowledge transmission and commercialization (Bhabha, 1994).

Communication Systems and the Production of Marginalization. Communication scholars provide several analyses of how these exclusions are institutionalized. Keyan Tomaselli (2003) observes that African media systems, often modeled after colonial broadcasters, continue to marginalize local languages and knowledge forms. "The media in Africa," he argues, "are caught between their normative obligations to serve the public and their structural tendencies to reproduce elite discourses" (Tomaselli, 2003, p. 14). These elite discourses are nearly always conducted in colonial languages, thereby reinforcing their dominance.

Kwasi Ansu-Kyeremeh (2005) introduces a vital counterpoint by highlighting the vibrancy of indigenous communication systems, including oral storytelling, community radio, and symbolic performances, which function as parallel public spheres. These are not mere relics of the past but active platforms of information exchange, civic engagement, and local knowledge dissemination. Yet, due to their non-alignment with the "formal" norms of Western communicative rationality, they are excluded from national development strategies and policy processes.

As Ansu-Kyeremeh puts it: "In Africa, the channels through which the majority of the people communicate are often ignored in national communication policies, leading to a fundamental disconnect between governments and the governed" (2005, p. 25). This disconnect is both a failure of communication and recognition that

perpetuates socio-political exclusion and impedes the formation of inclusive public spheres where diverse voices and knowledge systems can contribute to national development and democratic discourse.

Synthesis: A Triadic Framework for Understanding Exclusion. This framework clarifies how language is not merely a cultural issue but a structural determinant of whose knowledge is seen, valued, and commercialized. In African contexts, to speak in a colonial language is often to be heard; to speak in an indigenous one is often to be sidelined. If, as Ngũgĩ asserts, “language carries culture, and culture carries... the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (1986, p. 16), then the continued linguistic dualism of African public spheres represents a profound obstacle to inclusive development. Addressing it is not a matter of translation alone, but of reimagining the very architecture of legitimacy in knowledge systems.

While both Habermas and Ngũgĩ are concerned with participation in the public sphere, their perspectives differ fundamentally on the role of language. Habermas’s model implicitly assumes a linguistically homogenous public, often privileging dominant or official languages as neutral vehicles of rational debate. In contrast, Ngũgĩ foregrounds language as a battleground of cultural survival and epistemic legitimacy. For him, participation without linguistic decolonization is illusory, as the medium of communication shapes whose knowledge is heard, validated, and institutionalized. Juxtaposing these views reveals a critical gap in Habermas’s framework when applied to postcolonial Africa; the assumption that access to the public sphere is

merely procedural overlooks the deeper linguistic exclusions that Ngũgĩ exposes. Bridging these perspectives invites a rethinking of the public sphere, not as a linguistically abstract space, but as one rooted in multilingual realities where indigenous languages must be reclaimed to enable genuine communicative action. A compelling example of such a practical commitment to multilingualism in governance is found in South Africa, where parliamentary business can be conducted across its twelve official languages (Republic of South Africa, 1996).

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER AND COMMERCIALIZATION FROM THE PERIPHERY. The functioning of knowledge transfer and the process of commercializing indigenous knowledge (IK) are significantly hampered by the persistence of an excluded public sphere. In this configuration, formal systems of science, commerce, and policy-making operate largely in colonial languages and according to Western epistemic norms, rendering many indigenous forms of knowledge and communication invisible or illegible.

Hindered Knowledge Transfer. Effective knowledge transfer, whether it concerns the dissemination of scientific research to communities or the integration of indigenous practices into national frameworks, relies fundamentally on mutual intelligibility, legitimacy, and access. In African contexts, where the formal public sphere functions predominantly in European languages, these conditions are often unmet. The transfer of external knowledge to local communities is frequently limited or distorted by linguistic and epistemic mismatches. Scientific findings or development strategies may not be intelligible or persuasive when delivered through

unfamiliar languages and rationalities. As [Hountondji \(1997\)](#) argues, this "extraversion" of African scientific thought often leads to "the reception of knowledge without appropriation", a phenomenon where communities receive information without being enabled to internalize, adapt, or question it.

Conversely, the transfer of indigenous knowledge from communities to national or international arenas is obstructed by the marginal status of the languages and forms in which that knowledge is embedded. As [Habermas \(1987\)](#) might frame it, communicative action is short-circuited: the possibility of reaching mutual understanding across different lifeworlds is foreclosed by structural exclusion from the dominant public sphere. This has serious consequences for validation, adaptation, and institutional support. For instance, the formidable hurdles faced by traditional herbal remedies, such as Uganda's Covidex during the COVID-19 pandemic, in gaining formal validation and integration into national health systems show this disconnect. Despite widespread community use and perceived value, the inability to navigate dominant biomedical paradigms and their linguistic-epistemic demands meant that potentially useful local innovations struggled for institutional legitimacy and broader application, highlighting a major loss of accessible healthcare solutions ([Kasozi, 2021](#)).

Challenges for IK Commercialization. The commercialization of indigenous knowledge presents even greater challenges, given the historical and epistemological disjunctures between lifeworlds and systems. Indigenous knowledge is often transmitted orally, intergenerationally, and contextually, rooted in

practices, rituals, and ecological relationships that do not easily conform to the codified frameworks of intellectual property law, scientific taxonomy, or industrial design ([Warren, 1991](#)). Knowledge that emerges outside the formal public sphere often lacks institutional legitimacy. As [Coombe \(2001\)](#) notes, "only knowledge that fits dominant models of innovation, usually those grounded in Euro-American scientific paradigms, is recognized, patented, and funded." This delegitimization renders IK uncompetitive in the very arenas where commercialization decisions are made.

Even when IK has clear commercial value, such as medicinal plant knowledge, ecological resilience strategies, or artisanal techniques, translating it into the conceptual language of markets and policies is fraught with difficulty. Differences in language are compounded by ontological gaps: concepts that are central in one system may be nonexistent or misunderstood in another. This mismatch often results in what [Wynberg \(2004\)](#) terms "bioprospecting without benefit-sharing," where knowledge is extracted and commodified without meaningful involvement or consent from the source communities. This predicament is further worsened when indigenous African products, such as shea butter or certain whole grain foods, are appropriated, industrially repackaged with dominant language instructions, patented, and subsequently re-exported to African markets at premium prices. This insidious cycle, fundamentally anchored in colonial constructs dictating whose knowledge is recognized and legitimate, represents a pervasive form of epistemic and economic injustice ([Mgbeoji, 2007](#)). The communities that hold IK are typically excluded from policy forums where laws on patents, trade, or development are crafted. This exclusion reinforces power asymmetries and

reduces opportunities for fair engagement. As [Bavikatte and Robinson \(2011\)](#) observe, indigenous people are often present at the “table” only as objects of policy rather than as co-authors of their commercial futures.

Navigating Structural Barriers: Towards Alternative Pathways. Despite these systemic constraints, some IK commercialization initiatives have shown promise, particularly those that create or occupy alternative communication spaces. Community-run radio stations, culturally adapted storytelling apps, and local cooperatives developing products based on traditional practices all illustrate the potential of hybrid communication models.

For instance, the successful marketing of rooibos tea from South Africa’s Khoisan communities required product innovation and sustained advocacy to have the community recognized as custodians of the knowledge, leading to a benefit-sharing agreement ([Wynberg et al., 2009](#)). These breakthroughs were possible only through multi-scalar engagement, where activists, legal advocates, and community leaders worked across different public spheres to articulate the value of indigenous knowledge in contexts that the formal system could recognize.

Such examples suggest that genuine commercialization of IK requires more than market access. It demands epistemic justice. This involves creating channels through which IK holders can speak in their own terms, be heard, and shape the frameworks that govern their knowledge. Nevertheless, the practical realization of such channels raises critical questions: Who bears the primary responsibility for their establishment and sustained development? What enduring systemic

barriers have historically precluded their creation? Most importantly, can innovative media frameworks truly serve as effective alternative pathways to amplify these marginalized voices and facilitate genuine communicative action in diverse linguistic contexts?

LANGUAGE POLICY AND DIGITAL MEDIA: CONTESTING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE. The architecture of the public sphere in Africa is fundamentally shaped by language policy and digital media. These two forces, one rooted in statecraft and the other in technological evolution, can either entrench exclusion or enable broader participation in knowledge creation, dissemination, and commercialization.

Language Policy as a Gatekeeper. National language policies function as de facto gatekeepers to the public sphere, determining who can speak, be heard, and be understood in formal domains. Where colonial languages such as English, French, or Portuguese remain the primary or sole languages of government, higher education, and mainstream media, access to the public sphere is structurally limited ([Brock-Utne, 2002](#)). In such contexts, those not fluent in these languages are effectively silenced, and the legitimacy of knowledge expressed in indigenous tongues is undermined.

As [Brock-Utne \(2002\)](#) argues, the continued privileging of colonial languages perpetuates a “linguistic apartheid” that marginalizes local populations from public discourse and devalues their epistemologies. Language policy thus plays a constitutive role in defining whose knowledge counts, how it circulates, and where it gains traction. Conversely, language policies that

actively promote the use of African languages in education, media, administration, and research hold transformative potential. They can expand the boundaries of the public sphere by legitimizing diverse linguistic and epistemic traditions and enabling “multiple publics” to emerge (Alexander, 2005). However, implementing such policies requires more than symbolic recognition. It demands a political and material commitment to reversing the long-standing devaluation of African languages, building terminologies for contemporary use, and creating institutional pathways for African-language content to flourish in public discourse.

Digital Media as Potential Arenas for Inclusion.

Digital media offer unprecedented opportunities to circumvent some of the traditional exclusions of the public sphere. Social media platforms, messaging apps, podcasts, and local-language websites allow communities to bypass elite-controlled channels and form what Fraser (1990) might call “subaltern counterpublics”, alternative spaces where marginalized groups articulate their interests and perspectives. However, this potential is mediated by issues of access and digital literacy. The pervasive digital divide in many African contexts, particularly in terms of uneven access to smartphones, reliable internet connectivity, and affordable data, introduces a new layer of exclusion, limiting the full participation of vast segments of the population, especially in rural and low-income areas (Afrobarometer, 2020; World Bank, 2023). Therefore, while digital tools offer avenues for alternative discourse, their benefits remain unequally distributed, potentially creating new forms of marginalization within the emerging digital public sphere.

Creation of Alternative Publics. Online platforms allow speakers of African languages to create discursive arenas where knowledge is exchanged, contested, and celebrated on their terms. These digital counterpublics, such as Luganda YouTube channels, Kiswahili Twitter spaces, or Igbo Facebook groups, encourage community cohesion while generating new modalities for cultural and knowledge expression (Mabweazara, 2018). However, the emergence of these spaces also introduces novel challenges related to information integrity, platform governance, and linguistic marginalization within the digital sphere itself. Specifically, issues such as the spread of misinformation and disinformation in local languages, often inadequately moderated by global platforms, can undermine epistemic authority and societal cohesion. Furthermore, the governance models of these predominantly Western-owned platforms may perpetuate a form of ‘digital colonialism,’ where algorithmic biases, content policies, and monetization structures do not adequately cater to or represent African linguistic and cultural differences, thus limiting genuine digital self-determination (Mgbeoji, 2007; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024).

Increased Visibility of Marginalized IK. Digital content produced in African languages can gain national and even global visibility, bringing otherwise marginalized IK, such as oral histories, proverbs, ecological practices, or artisanal skills, into the broader public eye (Muturi and Mwangi, 2021). In this sense, digital media serve as both carriers of content and “amplifiers of epistemic presence”. From my perspective, this digital amplification represents a counter-hegemonic move that actively challenges the linguistic and epistemic gatekeeping that has historically sidelined African knowledge systems. It presents a

much-needed space for self-representation and validates knowledge on its own terms, moving beyond mere visibility to genuine epistemic empowerment. Furthermore, this growing digital presence is not incidental; it signifies a great shift towards re-localizing knowledge production and consumption with the potential to lay the groundwork for new and inclusive knowledge economies. This active engagement with digital platforms offers a tangible pathway towards rectifying long-standing epistemic injustices by allowing African communities to assert intellectual sovereignty over their heritage. Lastly, this phenomenon carries significant implications for language policy and digital development strategies. Recognizing digital platforms as essential sites for IK dissemination necessitates targeted interventions to support local content creation, ensure digital literacy in indigenous languages, and advocate for platform governance models that promote equitable participation and diverse knowledge flows.

New Commercial Pathways. Digital tools also provide direct channels for marketing and commercializing indigenous knowledge. Artisans, herbalists, and storytellers can bypass traditional gatekeepers such as publishers, licensing authorities, or state broadcasters by using mobile platforms to reach new audiences, sell products, and narrate the value of their practices in culturally resonant ways (Chiumbu and Mutsvairo, 2019).

However, digital inclusion is not automatic. As critical scholars remind us, the digital divide remains a real and growing concern, with disparities in access, infrastructure, and literacy reflecting and often worsening existing socioeconomic and linguistic inequalities (Graham *et al.*, 2015). For instance, in Sub-Saharan Africa,

only 27% of the population are currently using mobile internet services, leading to a significant 'usage gap' even where coverage exists (GSMA, 2024a). This divide is particularly stark between urban and rural areas; in Sub-Saharan Africa, adults in rural areas are 49% less likely to use mobile internet than those living in urban areas (GSMA, 2025). Furthermore, affordability remains a major barrier, as an entry-level internet-enabled device in Sub-Saharan Africa can cost 95% of the average monthly income for the poorest 20% of the population (GSMA, 2025). Moreover, the architecture of global platforms is rarely neutral: algorithms, design templates, and moderation practices often reproduce epistemic hierarchies even in ostensibly open spaces by favoring dominant languages and forms of expression. To unlock the potential of digital media, intentional strategies are needed to enable mutual understanding, rather than merely strategic communication. These include expanding access to affordable connectivity, investing in digital literacy programs in African languages, and supporting the development of platforms that privilege communicative action. Without such efforts, digital spaces risk becoming new arenas for exclusion, rather than instruments of epistemic justice.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES: BRIDGING THE EXCLUDED PUBLIC SPHERE

The excluded public sphere remains a central obstacle to enabling Africa's sustainable growth in the domains of inclusive knowledge transfer and the equitable commercialization of Indigenous Knowledge (IK). As demonstrated in preceding sections, access to the public sphere is neither evenly distributed nor linguistically neutral. Addressing this asymmetry requires recognizing

both the persistent structural challenges and the emerging opportunities for a paradigm shift.

Persistent Challenges. Language continues to serve as a principal axis of exclusion. The dominance of colonial languages in state institutions, higher education, and formal media restricts participation and delegitimizes knowledge expressed in African languages. For instance, parliamentary debates conducted predominantly in English, and national constitutions drafted in highly specialized, Latin-oriented English, effectively erect linguistic barriers that systematically disenfranchise the majority of citizens from essential deliberative and legal processes (McLaughlin, 2009). This barrier is more than a communicative inconvenience; it is a systemic mechanism of marginalization (Brock-Utne, 2002; Alexander, 2005).

A significant structural challenge is the tension between communal knowledge systems and formal Intellectual Property (IP) regimes. Frameworks such as the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) often fail to protect indigenous knowledge due to their emphasis on individual ownership and formal documentation. Scholars like Vandana Shiva and Anil Gupta have critiqued this misalignment, pointing to cases of biopiracy where corporations profit from IK without recognition or fair compensation to knowledge holders. A stark illustration of this is the protracted struggle over traditional knowledge associated with plants like Rooibos tea and Hoodia from Southern Africa. Corporations have historically sought patents on the plants' properties based on indigenous knowledge and traditional use, with the original knowledge holders, such as the San and Khoi communities, receiving minimal or no

benefit-sharing for decades, despite the multi-million-dollar industries that emerged (Mgbeoji, 2006; Wynberg, 2004). This indicates that such pervasiveness perpetuates a neo-colonial form of economic and epistemic exploitation and the marginalization of Indigenous Knowledge within dominant public spheres and commercialization channels that fundamentally undermine the very notion of intellectual sovereignty for African communities.

This systemic marginalization extends significantly into the realm of international trade, particularly impacting Africa's vast population of rural smallholder farmers who are the primary producers of agricultural food in Sub-Saharan Africa. Key global trade frameworks, such as those governed by the World Trade Organization (WTO) and its Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Agreement, impose stringent health and safety standards for food products entering international markets (WTO, n.d.). While significant for consumer protection, these regulations are primarily drafted and disseminated in dominant global languages like English, French, or Spanish. This linguistic-epistemic barrier is formidable for the majority of African smallholder farmers who communicate solely in indigenous languages. Consequently, they remain largely unaware of, or unable to fully comprehend and comply with, the complex requirements for accessing lucrative international markets. This linguistic disconnect acts as a significant non-tariff barrier, excluding vast segments of the rural African population from equitable participation in global agricultural trade and further entrenching the economic marginalization of communities whose food production practices are steeped in rich, yet often undocumented, Indigenous Knowledge.

Knowledge produced within indigenous or community-based contexts often lacks institutional validation. In policy discourse, academic research, and media representation, such knowledge is frequently dismissed as anecdotal, unscientific, or informal. This “legitimation deficit” reinforces epistemic injustice and stifles the potential of IK in broader knowledge economies (de Sousa Santos, 2014).

Interactions between formal institutions and indigenous knowledge holders are typically characterized by strategic action, dominated by power, persuasion, and extraction, rather than communicative action rooted in mutual understanding (Habermas, 1987). As a result, knowledge flows remain unidirectional, with little reciprocity or shared agency.

A significant gap exists between the rich communicative life of local communities and the dominant national and global public spheres. The lack of mediating structures such as comprehensive national translation and interpretation services in parliamentary and legal proceedings; adequately resourced community media outlets consistently broadcasting and publishing in diverse indigenous languages; or formalized participatory platforms that effectively integrate traditional leadership and local knowledge councils into national policy formulation prevent the articulation of indigenous perspectives in policy, innovation, and market contexts (Nyamnjoh, 2004).

While many African countries have adopted progressive language and media policies, the implementation of these frameworks remains inconsistent. For instance, despite policies promoting indigenous languages in primary education, a widespread 'switch-over' phenomenon

often occurs, where instruction abruptly shifts to English or French in higher grades, signaling an implicit devaluation of local languages for advanced learning and professional use (Benson, 2004). Similarly, national public broadcasters across the continent frequently operate with insufficient budgets for high-quality, diverse local language content production, leading to a continued reliance on cheaper, imported programming or content primarily in colonial languages. This lack of investment hampers the development of vibrant local public discourse and restricts pathways for the commercialization of indigenous cultural products (Maikaba and Msughter, 2019). Furthermore, governmental priorities often allocate meager resources to language development bodies, which hinder efforts to standardize terminology, publish materials, or enforce multilingual communication in state institutions, effectively reinforcing the status quo (Tollefson, 2012). This inconsistency is often due to institutional inertia, inadequate funding, and competing political priorities, which in due course mean that inclusive language policies do not translate into real material change in public discourse or access to commercialization infrastructure.

Emerging Opportunities Despite the challenges.

outlined in the preceding sections, including colonial linguistic dominance, the misaligned nature of current IP regimes, and the pervasive digital divide, there are opportunities for restructuring the public sphere in ways that enable inclusive knowledge flows and equitable IK commercialization. Empirical illustrations reaffirm the urgency and feasibility of bridging the excluded public sphere. A prime example demonstrating both the urgency of protecting IK and the feasibility of achieving benefit-sharing is

the Hoodia cactus case in Southern Africa. While it initially starkly revealed how the San people's indigenous knowledge about its appetite-suppressant medicinal use was commercialized by pharmaceutical companies without adequate consent or fair compensation, the subsequent landmark agreement reached between the San Council and industry stakeholders established a significant precedent for benefit-sharing from IK, showcasing a tangible pathway towards more equitable commercialization and intellectual sovereignty (Wynberg, 2007; Chennells and Gachenga, 2011). This highlights the legitimacy and ownership struggles facing community-held IK. In Uganda, digital storytelling projects in local languages have empowered communities to document and share their heritage. In Kenya, community radio stations broadcasting in indigenous languages have proven effective in disseminating local agricultural and health knowledge. These examples demonstrate the potential of inclusive communication platforms grounded in African languages. The rise of digital and community-based media platforms opens new possibilities for constructing inclusive public spheres. Platforms that operate in African languages and are tailored to local communicative cultures can provide accessible, participatory arenas for discourse, knowledge exchange, and market engagement (Mabweazara, 2018).

Recognizing and institutionalizing traditional communication forms, such as town criers (individuals historically tasked with making public announcements and relaying information orally in a community, often with a distinctive call or signal), storytelling, clan assemblies, and oral forums, can serve as both epistemic and commercial infrastructures. These systems are often better aligned with community values and

can play a significant role in facilitating trusted, culturally relevant knowledge transfer (Mazrui and Mazrui, 1998). Deliberate efforts are needed to mediate between local and formal spheres. This can involve training “knowledge translators,” supporting bilingual platforms, or developing participatory communication initiatives that promote dialogic exchange across linguistic and epistemic boundaries (Fraser, 1990).

The commercialization of IK must move beyond extraction and appropriation toward processes rooted in communicative action. This involves creating participatory models of co-creation, joint ownership of knowledge products, and inclusive decision-making that ensures communities are not merely sources of knowledge but active stakeholders in its value realization. Findings grounded in media and communication research serve as an essential starting point for informing more inclusive and effective policy frameworks. Scholars and practitioners must continue to advocate for policies that begin with the process of dismantling linguistic hierarchies, fund local language content production, and build institutions that recognize and promote African epistemologies on equal footing with global norms. Bridging the excluded public sphere is not a peripheral concern; it is foundational to inclusive innovation, equitable development, and cultural sovereignty in Africa. While recognizing that African countries are indeed moving in different lanes regarding linguistic decolonisation and digital inclusion, convergence of media pluralism, digital tools, and epistemic activism presents a generational opportunity to recast the public sphere as a truly shared space, one where diverse voices, languages, and knowledge systems co-produce Africa's future. Leveraging the African Union (AU) could provide an essential pathway to

accelerate more harmonized progress towards linguistic decolonisation and the equitable recognition of diverse knowledge systems across member states. Such a continental approach could facilitate coordinated policy frameworks, resource mobilization, and the establishment of shared standards for linguistic and epistemic justice that would facilitate shared space where diverse voices, languages, and knowledge systems co-produce Africa's future.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS: COMMUNICATING INCLUSION AND ACCESS.

Transforming the public sphere to enable inclusive knowledge transfer and the equitable commercialization of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) demands a radical reconfiguration of communication systems. This transformation must be guided by targeted policy interventions grounded in principles of linguistic justice, epistemic inclusion, and participatory communication. The following policy recommendations emerge from the foregoing analysis:

Mandate and Resource Multilingual Public Communication. Governments and public institutions must adopt and enforce comprehensive multilingual communication policies. Countries like South Africa, with its 11 official languages, provide a notable, albeit complex, example of a state committed to multilingualism in its foundational legal and institutional frameworks ([Kamwangamalu, 2010](#)). These policies should obligate all branches of the state, including education, healthcare, justice, and media, to operate in the dominant local languages of their constituencies. For this transformation to succeed,

appropriate resources must be allocated to ensure that communication across print, broadcast, and digital platforms is translated, contextualized, and culturally adapted. Such measures are essential to democratize access to public discourse and services, thereby expanding the boundaries of the public sphere ([Brock-Utne, 2002](#)).

Invest in Local Language Media as Pillars of the Public Sphere. Local-language media are not auxiliary to national development. They are foundational. Policies must prioritize sustained investment in African-language media through grants, training programs, and infrastructure development. This investment should increasingly look towards African philanthropic platforms and regional development funds. It should recognize the often limited and conditional nature of Western funding for such culturally specific initiatives. These media outlets should be recognized as legitimate arenas of public deliberation, knowledge dissemination, and economic empowerment, especially for IK-based entrepreneurship. Indeed, facilitating such recognition could include establishing dedicated awards ceremonies, akin to global media accolades, to celebrate impactful programs and content. A vital new category could be specifically dedicated to excellence in Indigenous Knowledge (IK) dissemination that promotes culturally relevant storytelling and innovation. Theoretical perspectives from Ansu-Kyeremeh and Tomaselli highlight the need to treat these spaces as marginal and essential components of plural public spheres (Salawu and Chibita, 2015).

Promote Digital Inclusion and Local-Language Literacy. Digital technologies offer unprecedented opportunities for participation in the public sphere, but only if they are equitably

accessible and usable. Policy frameworks must include: 1) Investment in digital infrastructure for rural and linguistically diverse regions, 2) Subsidized access to mobile and internet services, and 3) Localized digital literacy programs that empower users to access information, produce content, engage in civic discourse, and participate in digital economies, all in their preferred languages (Mabweazara, 2018).

Gender Dimensions in Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Gender dynamics further complicate the marginalization of IK. Indigenous women often serve as custodians of knowledge in areas such as herbal medicine, food security, and oral history. However, they are doubly marginalized, first by the privileging of colonial languages and second by patriarchal structures within and beyond their communities (UN Women, 2022). My observations within communal networks highlight this reality: I have witnessed countless instances of women tilling fields, fetching water from communal wells, or preparing girls for marriage, all while simultaneously engaging in rich storytelling, sharing proverbs, and imparting intergenerational knowledge. This everyday informal transmission represents a wealth of undocumented IK, seamlessly woven into the fabric of daily life, yet largely overlooked by formal public spheres and commercialization channels. Addressing the exclusion of IK from the public sphere requires a gender-sensitive lens that acknowledges the centrality of women in the preservation, transmission, and innovation of indigenous knowledge. Policies and platforms that amplify women's voices in their native languages can advance the visibility and legitimacy of this knowledge in broader development discourses.

Reform Communication and Media Policy for Linguistic and Epistemic Inclusion.

Communication and media policies must be revised to reflect the linguistic and epistemological diversity of African societies. Reforms should: 1) Promote diverse media ownership reflective of linguistic communities, 2) Incentivize multilingual programming and publishing, and 3) Include ethical guidelines on the use and representation of IK to prevent appropriation and epistemic harm.

These policy aspirations inherently call for significant government investment. This includes direct budgetary allocations for public service broadcasters to expand local language content, and funding for national language development bodies to support translation and terminology standardization. Beyond government commitment, however, resource mobilization must also leverage diverse streams. This could involve: 1) Establishing independent national or regional funds specifically for African-language media and IK projects, potentially sustained by levies on commercial media or telecom companies, 2) As previously noted, promoting partnerships with emerging African philanthropic organizations and regional development banks, 3) Collaborating with private sector entities, particularly in technology and telecommunications, to develop and distribute local language digital content and platforms, and 4) Strategically engaging with international partners who prioritize cultural diversity, digital inclusion, and sustainable development.

In terms of incentivization, these measures would need: 1) Offering reduced taxes or direct subsidies to media houses, publishers, and content creators who prioritize and achieve high levels of local language and IK-based content, 2) Granting favorable licensing terms or access to spectrum for community radio stations and digital platforms

dedicated to African languages, 3) Implementing and enforcing strong local and indigenous language content quotas across all media platforms, monitored by statutory authorities, 4) Providing direct grants for training programs that build skills in local language content production, journalism, and IK documentation, 5) Governments and public institutions should prioritize purchasing advertising space, publishing services, and communication tools from media outlets that adhere to multilingual communication standards, and 6) Instituting national and regional awards for excellence in African-language media and IK dissemination, as discussed. These reforms must be informed by critical communication theory to guard against tokenism and instrumentalization of indigenous voices.

Support Participatory Communication for Bridging Divides. To overcome the disconnect between community life worlds and formal systems, governments and donors should support participatory communication projects rooted in local languages and cultural frameworks. For instance, in the Ugandan context, these initiatives could be effectively organized under existing structures such as current chiefdoms to leverage their established community networks and cultural authority. These initiatives should aim to: 1) Facilitate cross-sphere dialogue, 2) Enable community co-creation of knowledge and content, and 3) Support IK holders in articulating and commercializing their knowledge on their terms. This aligns with Habermasian notions of communicative action and the call for mutual intelligibility and respect between divergent knowledge systems.

Integrate Critical Communication Theory into Education and Training. Journalism and communication training must move beyond

technical instruction to include critical theory and equip graduates with the analytical tools to challenge structural exclusions. Curricula should explore: 1) Language and power in the African public sphere (Ngũgĩ, 1986), 2) The role of media in reproducing or contesting inequality, 3) The politics of knowledge production and commercialization, and 4) Ethical issues in representing marginalized communities and IK. Such education is essential to cultivating media professionals, researchers, and policymakers committed to inclusive communication landscapes.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the linguistic marginalization in Africa, highlighted by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, has led to the creation of an excluded public sphere, a concept clarified by Habermas' theoretical framework. This exclusion from the formal arenas of knowledge validation and development discourse significantly hinders effective knowledge transfer and the equitable commercialization of indigenous knowledge. Drawing on Communication Studies literature, the assessment explains how IK, embedded in African languages and traditional communication forms, struggles to gain legitimacy and traction within a dominant public sphere operating primarily in colonial languages. The challenges in commercializing IK are linked to barriers to accessing and participating in this sphere and the prevalence of strategic action over communicative action.

Achieving genuine decolonization requires actively challenging the structures that create this excluded public sphere. By transforming communication systems and policies to prioritize African languages and cultural narratives, Africa

can create inclusive public spheres where diverse knowledge systems are valued, debated, and leveraged. This will drive sustainable development from within, facilitate more effective knowledge transfer, and unlock new, equitable pathways for the commercialization of indigenous knowledge.

Future research should seek to understand and emulate how digital IK platforms operating in African languages are reshaping the public sphere and what barriers remain. Practical pathways include piloting local government multilingual knowledge hubs, for example, a district-level digital portal providing agricultural advice, health information, and civic education in local languages like Swahili, Hausa, Yoruba, isiZulu, Luo, or Amharic, while also allowing citizens to submit local innovations or concerns in their native tongues. Another pathway involves establishing community-based innovation registries, such as a communal online database managed by traditional leaders where local herbal remedies, sustainable farming practices, or artisanal designs are formally documented and attributed to specific clans or communities, allowing for collective licensing and benefit-sharing. These initiatives safeguard communal knowledge rights while increasing market access.

The field of Journalism and Communication has a significant role to play in analyzing these dynamics, advocating for policy change, and building communication strategies and platforms that bridge the excluded public sphere in Africa. Looking ahead, particularly given Africa's burgeoning youth population, a demographic remarkably digital-native and uninhibited in their online engagement, a generational opportunity emerges to fundamentally disrupt the historical monopolies of colonial languages and dominant

knowledge systems. My observations within vibrant African communities, coupled with the theoretical frameworks explored throughout this paper, suggest that this digitally fearless youth, armed with smartphones and social media platforms, possess an unprecedented capacity to create, share, and commercialize IK in their native languages. This active digital citizenship can bypass traditional gatekeepers, facilitate new linguistic norms online, and catalyze a grassroots movement for epistemic justice to co-produce an African future that is genuinely inclusive, culturally sovereign, and reflective of its diverse knowledge heritage.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest in this paper.

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