

Protective Knowledges, The Wisdom to Protect

Firmin Mbala

Human Rights and International Development Specialist

mbalafirmin@gmail.com

Mame-Penda Ba, Olivier Dangles, Faisal Garba, Mohamed Jouili, Toussaint Kafarhire, Philippe Lavigne Delville, Frédérique Louveau, Nadine Machikou, Sara Mejdoubi, Uchenna Okeja, Mireille Razafindrakoto & Cheikh Sadibou Sakho

redaction@globalafricasciences.org

This special issue of *Global Africa* opens with a dual challenge: to conceptualize protective knowledge as situated forms of resistance, and to question our collective capacity to establish an ethics of protection. For protection is not merely a humanitarian reflex or an abstract moral imperative: it is a political act, a situated posture shaped by power dynamics, historical legacies, contemporary contacts, and differentiated vulnerabilities.

Protective knowledge, as discussed here, are neither mere technical skills nor rigid traditions. They emerge from social bricolage, everyday tactics, and forms of communal intelligence which, within contexts of structural violence, institutional precarity, and democratic fragility, serve to safeguard life, dignity, and memory. They are often rendered invisible, marginalized, even criminalized forms of knowledge—precisely because they escape state control or challenge hegemonic norms of knowledge.

In Africa, this capacity to protect—our thinkers, our communities, our languages, our memories—remains tragically insufficient. Too often, critical thinkers are forced into exile, knowledge institutions are delegitimized or instrumentalized, and popular solidarities are weakened by forms of social fragmentation or political repression. This issue is therefore a call for the reappropriation, valorization, and transmission of these protective resources. As such, it provides an appropriate occasion to pay a well-deserved tribute to two major figures of African thoughts who have recently passed away: Valentin-Yves Mudimbe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.

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Valentin-Yves Mudimbe: The Decolonizer of Knowledge¹

Philosopher, novelist, and critic, Valentin-Yves Mudimbe was one of the most pivotal thinkers of the 20th century. With *The Invention of Africa* (Mudimbe, 1988), he profoundly disrupted postcolonial studies by unveiling the deep structure of the “colonial library”: that set of religious, anthropological, and administrative texts that constructed Africa as an object to be known, dominated, and saved. But Mudimbe never contented himself with solely deconstructing; he proposed an intellectually rigorous and demanding re-foundation to think Africa beyond imposed identities.

His work, between philosophy and literature, spanning the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Europe, and the United States, embodied a thought of passage, errancy, and complexity. It refused conceptual prisons, whether colonial or nationalist, under the guise of “authenticity”. It calls for thinking Africa from within, without severing it from the world. In this, Mudimbe is a major inspiration for protective knowledge: he teaches us that to protect is also to think differently, to reject the self-evident, and to build plural, open knowledge capable of accounting for the diversity of African experiences.

When he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Lubumbashi in 2019, Mudimbe expressed deep emotion at being finally recognized in his home country, after having been celebrated on every other continent. His gesture at the time—donating his personal library to this same university—is an act of transmission, but also a cry of warning. For Mudimbe, like many others, was forced to flee his country, driven out by the autocracy of Mobutu Sese Seko, who reigned through repression and corruption in the DRC from 1965 to 1997. We failed in our duty to protect him. And yet, he never broke his attachment to Africa, thinking for it, with it, despite his exile.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o: Language as a Territory of Resistance²

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, novelist, playwright, essayist, was one of the most powerful advocates of cultural decolonization. Born under British colonial rule, he understood early on that language is a battlefield. After initially writing in English, he chose Kikuyu, his mother tongue, to describe the world, to write plays, novels, essays. This radical act was an act of protection: to protect African languages is to protect imaginaries, memories, and resistances.

His work, from *Petals of Blood* to *Decolonising the Mind* (Ngũgĩ, 1986), is a plea for rooted literature, an insurgent thought, and an Africa that tells its own story. But this fight cost him dearly: imprisoned, censored, and exiled for over twenty years, Ngũgĩ paid for his commitment with his flesh. And when he attempted to return to Kenya in 2004, he was viciously attacked, along with his wife. We failed in our duty to protect him. Commentators rightly traced the roots of this brutal humiliation to the deterioration of cultural institutions, such as libraries, emptied of their books by theft or mutilation. This neglect symbolizes an erosion of civic virtue³.

And yet, Ngũgĩ never ceased to write, to dream, to transmit. He believed in a literature capable of opening the way to philosophy, science, and technology. In this respect, he stands as a tutelary figure of protective knowledges: he showed that to protect is also to create, translate, teach, resist.

1 On Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, consult the seminal Mudimbe, V.-Y. (2021). *L'invention de l'Afrique: Gnose, philosophie et ordre de la connaissance*. Présence Africaine; Kavwahirehi, K. (2006). *V.Y. Mudimbe et la ré-invention de l'Afrique: Poétique et politique de la décolonisation des sciences humaines* (Coll. Francopolyphonies). Rodopi. And the documentary Bekolo, J.-P. (Director). (2015). *Les Choses et les Mots de Mudimbe* [Documentary film, 243 min]. JPB Productions offers a poignant look at the philosopher's life and thought.

2 For more on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o's work, see Gikandi, S. (2001). *Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o*. Cambridge University Press.

3 Onyango-Obbo, C. (2004, August, 16). *Ngugi's attack: It all started in our libraries. The East African*. Collected from <https://www1.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/tburke1/perma83004.html> (consulted on June 7th, 2024).

A Legacy, A Responsibility

Evoking these two giants of thought is more than just a tribute. It is a (re)call to our responsibilities. For while we celebrate Mudimbe and Ngũgĩ, others continue, amidst indifference and silence, to suffer state violence. In Benin, constitutional scholar Joël Aïvo, in Cameroon, political scientists Alain Fogue and Abdu Karim Ali, in Guinea, researcher Aliou Bah, are all currently imprisoned for their ideas. And too often, African academic circles remain silent, cowardly silent.

As Nadine Machikou (2024) points out, international frameworks fall short in protecting African scholars⁴. It is time to build protection mechanisms rooted in our realities, our solidarities, our knowledge. This is the very purpose of this issue: to conceive protective knowledge as tools of resistance, care, and transformation.

Mudimbe and Ngũgĩ have bequeathed us tools. It is now up to us to use them. For to protect is to resist, to exist. This issue is dedicated to them, and to all those, like Koyo Kouoh, who are not mentioned here but whose works are lifelines of freedom and existence. May their struggles remind us that, sometimes, knowing how to protect begins with a simple act: breaking the silence.

This issue of *Global Africa* is therefore a manifesto. It affirms that protective knowledge are not relics of the past, but contemporary bricolages, vital forces, levers of emancipation, acts of courage. It reminds us that knowing how to protect also means protecting those who know. Protective knowledge are not merely techniques; they are an ethic. One that requires us to reach out to the victim of domestic violence, to the girl subjected to excision or forced marriage, but also to the professor threatened for his article, the censored artist, the student beaten for holding a sign. And since to protect is to refuse the complicity of silence, we open this issue of *Global Africa* with three texts celebrating the lives, struggles and works of our illustrious ancestors: V.-Y., Thiong'o and Kouoh.

4 Machikou, N. (2024). Are African scholars at risk? The invisibility of Africans in relief policies for endangered academics. In L. Dakhli, P. Laborier & F. Wolff (Eds.), *Academics in a century of displacement: The global history and politics of protecting endangered scholars* (pp. 263–290). Springer VS. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-43540-0_11