39th KUASS  
(Kyoto University African Studies Seminar)  
Amos Tutuola and the Elusiveness ofCompleteness

Date: July 4 (Sat), 2015, 15:00 – 17:00  
Venue: Small Meeting Room 1, Inamori Center 3F, Kawabata Campus, Kyoto University.

Title: Amos Tutuola and the Elusiveness of Completeness

Lecturer: Francis B. Nyamnjoh  
(Professor, University of Cape Town, South Africa)

Abstract:  
This lecture argues that the universe depicted by Amos Tutuola in his novels – *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* – is one of infinite possibilities where nothing is ever complete, and where to seek or claim completeness is to ignore, to one’s peril, the reality of incompleteness as the normal order of things. Humans, ghosts, spirits, monsters, freak creatures, death and the dead, and gods are far from seeking completeness as a permanent state of being – an ultimate and extravagant illusion in a context where categories acquire meaning only through action and interaction. To achieve greater efficacy in their actions and interactions, Tutuola’s creatures seek creative ways to activate themselves to commensurate levels of potency. This is achieved through relationships of interdependence with incomplete others, as well as through technologies of self-extension, jujus and magic for example, which can be acquired and lost with circumstances.

Tutuola himself epitomises the universe he depicts, not only through his own elusive quest for completeness in a world of zero sum games of civilisations founded on exclusionary violence, but also by pointing a critical finger at the modern African intellectual elite who have unquestioningly yielded to a narrow Eurocentric index of civilisation and humanity. The flexibility and fluidity of reality depicted in Tutuola’s universe challenges a social science founded narrowly on dichotomies, dualisms and bounded identities. In this regard, his books provide popular ontological insights that could contribute significantly to the reconstruction of a decolonised social science in Africa.
This lecture thus explores what Tutuola offers ongoing epistemological debates on the study of Africa more broadly, especially in the social sciences. It highlights and discusses elements from the two novels that emphasize the logic of inclusion over that of exclusion and the violence of zero sum games – logic often uncritically internalised and reproduced by practicing social scientists in Africa fixated with micro categorisations, abstractions, appearances and permanence. The lecture argues that Tutuola's novels offer comprehensive depictions of African endogenous universes wherein reality is more than meets the eye and the world an experience of life beyond sensory perceptions.

These are universes where being and becoming materialise through the consciousness that gives it meaning. Consciousness matters more than the containers that house it. Consciousness can inhabit any container – human and non-human, animate and inanimate, visible and invisible – regardless of the state of completeness or incompleteness of the container in question. These universes celebrate what it means to be a frontier being, at the crossroads and junctions of multiple influences and possibilities, mixing and blending to forge a vision where certainties are never too rigid and the prospect of innovation a constant source of hope.

Furthermore, the lecture argues that Tutuola’s novels are not just works of fiction. They are founded on the lived realities of Yoruba society – realities shared with many other communities across the continent – and depict endogenous epistemologies that are very popular in Africa, as the stories he recounts are commonplace across the continent.

However, despite their popularity with ordinary Africans and with elite Africans especially in settings away from the scrutinizing prescriptive gaze of their western and westernised counterparts, such epistemologies are mainly dormant or invisible in scholarly circles because they are often ignored, caricatured or misrepresented in the categories of ‘magic’, ‘witchcraft’, ‘sorcery’, ‘superstition’, ‘primitivism’, ‘savagery’ and ‘animism’ inspired by the origins and dominance of Eurocentric social sciences. Like the narrators in his novels, Tutuola is unapologetically part and parcel of the universe that fascinates him. His stories are contributions to his mission of keeping alive and relevant African ways of knowing and knowledge production, and fending off the one-dimensionalism of resilient colonialism and the ambitions of completeness which it claims and inspires.

Co-organized by the Grant in Aid for Scientific Research (S) Project: Comprehensive Area Studies on Coexistence and Conflict Resolution Realizing the African Potentials