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Algorithmic Amnesia and the Digital (In)visibility of Francophone African Cultural Heritage: A Postcolonial Pragmatics Approach

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Abstract

This paper introduces *algorithmic amnesia* to describe how digital platforms render African cultural heritage, particularly in Francophone Africa, invisible and forgettable. Drawing on critical algorithm studies, postcolonial theory, and pragmatics, the paper argues that algorithmic amnesia operates as a form of postcolonial injustice through the pragmatic mechanisms of digital discourse. Using case studies of music discoverability, oral tradition preservation, and search engine representation, the paper demonstrates how linguistic bias, data asymmetry, and content moderation produce cultural erasure. The paper proposes pragmatic sovereignty as a framework for resistance, analysing community-led data practices, locally grounded AI systems, and policy advocacy emerging across Francophone Africa. The study concludes that algorithmic amnesia constitutes a new form of colonial epistemic violence demanding recognition and resistance.

Keywords: algorithmic amnesia, postcolonial pragmatics, Francophone Africa, cultural heritage, digital justice

Résumé

Cet article introduit le concept **d'**amnésie algorithmique pour décrire la manière dont les plateformes numériques rendent invisibles et voués à l'oubli les patrimoines culturels africains, particulièrement en Afrique francophone. S'appuyant sur les études critiques des algorithmes, la théorie postcoloniale et la pragmatique, il analyse cette amnésie comme une forme d'injustice postcoloniale inscrite dans les mécanismes du discours numérique. À travers des études de cas portant sur la découvrabilité musicale, la préservation des traditions orales et la représentation culturelle dans les moteurs de recherche, l'article examine comment les biais linguistiques, les asymétries des données et la modération des contenus favorisent l'effacement culturel. Il propose la souveraineté pragmatique comme cadre de résistance, en étudiant les pratiques communautaires de gestion des données, les systèmes d'intelligence artificielle adaptés aux contextes locaux et les initiatives de plaidoyer politique. L'étude souligne ainsi la nécessité de reconnaître et de combattre cette nouvelle forme de violence épistémique coloniale.

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Mots-clés : Amnésie algorithmique, pragmatique postcoloniale, Afrique francophone, patrimoine culturel, justice numérique.

1.0. INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of contemporary society has produced a profound paradox for African cultural heritage. Digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for the documentation, dissemination, and revitalisation of cultural practices historically marginalised by colonial and postcolonial knowledge regimes (Risam 135). At the same time, the algorithmic infrastructures governing these platforms, including search engines, recommendation systems, and content moderation tools, are increasingly recognised as sites of systematic exclusion, reproducing and amplifying historical patterns of cultural erasure. This paradox is acutely felt in Francophone Africa, where linguistic and cultural heritage exists at the intersection of colonial legacies, global digital inequalities, and emerging forms of algorithmic governance.

This paper introduces the concept of *algorithmic amnesia* to describe the systematic process through which digital platforms render African cultural heritage invisible, unsearchable, and ultimately forgettable. This phenomenon is not the result of intentional censorship but emerges from what scholars describe as algorithmic silence, whereby certain histories and perspectives remain marginal within digital networks through limited visibility, selective ranking, and uneven patterns of circulation rather than explicit prohibition (Cobbe 742). The paper argues that *algorithmic amnesia* can be understood as a form of postcolonial injustice, operating through the pragmatic mechanisms of digital discourse to undermine the epistemic and cultural sovereignty of Francophone African communities.

The stakes of this inquiry are considerable. As the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie has recognised, content that exists but that algorithms rarely propose risks remaining largely invisible (Nonfon). In Francophone Africa, this invisibility extends beyond individual pieces of content to encompass entire linguistic and cultural ecosystems. A song in Fon, a sound archive in Yoruba, a traditional narrative, or a documentary on Beninese heritage all risk disappearing from digital memory if they are insufficiently present in the datasets that train algorithmic systems (Nonfon). The question, as one Beninese journalist asked, is stark: if the algorithm does not know our stories, who will tell them tomorrow (Nonfon)?

This paper develops a postcolonial pragmatics approach to analyse *algorithmic amnesia* as a discursive phenomenon. Postcolonial pragmatics examines how linguistic strategies in postcolonial contexts are shaped by power asymmetries and the indigenisation of communicative norms (Perez-Sabater and Maguelouk-Moffo 300). The paper argues that *algorithmic amnesia* must be understood not merely as a technical failure of data representation but as a pragmatic process through which the communicative agency of Francophone African communities is systematically undermined. By analysing the pragmatic strategies through which digital platforms construct and maintain cultural invisibility, the paper aims to develop a theoretical framework for understanding and resisting algorithmic exclusion.

The paper proceeds in seven parts. The first section reviews existing scholarship on algorithmic memory, postcolonial digital studies, and epistemic injustice. The second section establishes the theoretical framework of postcolonial pragmatics and its applicability to the study of digital discourse. The third section outlines the methodology guiding the

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analysis. The fourth section analyses the mechanisms through which *algorithmic amnesia* operates. The fifth section examines case studies from Francophone Africa. The sixth section considers strategies of algorithmic resistance and proposes a framework for *pragmatic sovereignty*. The conclusion reflects on the implications of *algorithmic amnesia* for broader debates about digital justice and cultural rights.

2.0. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of *algorithmic amnesia* builds upon and extends several strands of contemporary scholarship. The first is the emerging field of algorithmic memory studies, which examines how digital platforms and recommendation systems shape collective memory. Andrew Hoskins"s notion of the connective turn in memory studies provides a foundational insight: in digital environments, memory is not a static archive but a continuously circulating process whose visibility increasingly depends on platform infrastructures (Hoskins 270). Jennifer Cobbe develops this insight by analysing how algorithmically driven recommendation systems on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook reshape the dynamics of cultural memory and collective narrative formation. He identifies three interrelated mechanisms through which algorithmic memory operates: amplification and erasure, commodification and datafication, and the reconfiguration of identity and belonging (Cobbe 741). These mechanisms are central to understanding *algorithmic amnesia*, which can be understood as the systemic outcome of these processes when they operate in contexts of structural inequality.

The second scholarly foundation is the literature on epistemic injustice. Miranda Fricker"s work on testimonial and hermeneutical injustice provides a crucial analytical vocabulary for understanding how algorithmic systems wrong individuals and communities in their capacity as knowers. Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word (Fricker 17). In the algorithmic context, this manifests as the systematic devaluation of African languages and cultural knowledge in training data, search results, and content moderation decisions. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when someone's experiences are not well understood by themselves or by others because these experiences do not fit concepts that can be found in popular language (Fricker 155). Algorithmic systems, trained predominantly on Global North data, lack the concepts and categories necessary to interpret African cultural expressions, resulting in what Abeba Birhane describes as the epistemic injustice of AI systems that frequently reproduce historical exclusion patterns due to present dominant datasets and epistemic assumptions as objective and universal (Birhane 391).

The third body of scholarship concerns algorithmic colonialism. Birhane defines this as the process through which external technologies distort African languages and political realities due to limited linguistic coverage and foreign dominance in digital infrastructure (Birhane 394). Job Mwaura in her analysis of AI and democracy in Kenya, argues that AI is reshaping governance not only through bias and misinformation but through a deeper process of algorithmic colonialism, where external technologies distort African languages and political realities (Mwaura 76). This process undermines epistemic access and democratic participation by subjecting African linguistic and cultural realities to algorithmic systems that neither understand nor recognise them (Mwaura 79). *Algorithmic amnesia* is thus a manifestation of algorithmic colonialism, the specific mechanism through which colonial epistemic hierarchies are reproduced in digital form.

A fourth body of scholarship, emerging from media and communication studies, addresses the concept of communicative justice. Seth Lazar argues that algorithmic

intermediaries govern the digital public sphere through their architectures, amplification algorithms, and moderation practices, shaping public communication and distributing attention in ways that were previously infeasible with such subtlety, speed and scale (Lazar 2). This framework is crucial for understanding *algorithmic amnesia* because it shifts the focus from individual acts of censorship to the structural power of algorithmic systems to determine what is communicable and what is not. While Lazar"s work focuses on the normative dimensions of communicative justice in democratic societies, the present study extends this framework to the postcolonial context, asking what communicative justice means when the histories of colonialism and the ongoing effects of global power asymmetries are taken into account.

A fifth body of scholarship, emerging from African digital studies, addresses the specific challenges of language technology on the continent. Collins Ketere's study of AI-driven media and the reclamation of African linguistic identities in South Africa reveals how algorithmic infrastructures reproduce colonial linguistic hierarchies, marginalising languages like Setswana, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga through reduced visibility and error rates of 30 to 42 percent (Ketere, "Decolonizing Artificial Intelligence: reducing algorithmic" 377). Aiseng argues that by centring epistemic sovereignty and linguistic rights, it becomes possible to transform AI from a vehicle of assimilation into an instrument for cultural affirmation and decolonial futures (Ketere, ""Decolonizing Artificial Intelligence: reducing algorithmic" 390). Gloria Anyango Ooko develops a decolonial framework for communicating about AI in African public service delivery, arguing that improving communication with citizens in the context of AI-driven public service requires a focus on incorporating African voices into the development and implementation of digital systems (Ooko 4). These studies provide empirical grounding for the concept of *algorithmic amnesia* while also pointing toward strategies of resistance.

While these five bodies of scholarship provide essential foundations, they leave a significant gap. Existing work on algorithmic memory tends to focus on the mechanisms of memory formation without adequately theorising the communicative dimensions of algorithmic power. Scholarship on epistemic injustice identifies the harms of credibility deficits and hermeneutical gaps but does not fully explain how these harms are produced through the pragmatic structures of digital discourse. Work on algorithmic colonialism diagnoses the reproduction of colonial power relations but often treats language and communication as secondary to economic and political factors. Work on communicative justice provides a normative framework but does not engage with the specificities of the postcolonial context. African digital studies provide empirical evidence of linguistic marginalisation but have not yet developed a theoretical framework that connects these findings to broader questions of communicative agency and epistemic sovereignty. What remains insufficiently examined is the specifically pragmatic dimension of algorithmic exclusion: how algorithmic systems shape the conditions of communicative possibility, determining what speech acts are recognised, what implicatures can be drawn, and what forms of cultural expression are intelligible. The present study addresses this gap by developing a postcolonial pragmatics framework that centres the communicative dimensions of *algorithmic amnesia*.

3.0. POSTCOLONIAL PRAGMATICS: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Postcolonial pragmatics provides the theoretical apparatus for this analysis. As a field, postcolonial pragmatics examines how the pragmatic norms and strategies of postcolonial societies are shaped by the histories of colonialism and the ongoing effects of global power asymmetries (Anchimbe 30).

The framework was developed by Eric Anchimbe and Richard Janney, who argued that the specificities of interaction in postcolonial societies require analytical tools capable of accounting for the ways in which colonial contact has shaped communicative norms and practices (Anchimbe and Janney 1452). This field pays particular attention to the strategic use of code-switching and other linguistic strategies for relationship maintenance in communities that constitute translanguaging spaces (Perez-Sabater and Maguelouk-Moffo 302).

Postcolonial pragmatics draws upon several theoretical resources. First, it engages with the work of Teun van Dijk on the discourse of power and the reproduction of dominance through language use. Van Dijk"s insight that discourse is not only a form of social interaction but also a form of social domination is particularly relevant to the analysis of algorithmic systems, which can be understood as discourse machines that reproduce power relations through their selection, ranking, and recommendation of content (van Dijk 25). Second, this framework incorporates the insights of scholars such as Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook on the disinvention of languages and the need to analyse language practices in postcolonial contexts in terms other than those inherited from colonial linguistics (Makoni and Pennycook 2). This perspective is crucial for understanding how algorithmic systems impose colonial categories of language and culture on African realities.

Third, postcolonial pragmatics engages with the concept of epistemic sovereignty, which has become central to debates about AI and data governance in Africa. Ketere argues that centring epistemic sovereignty and linguistic rights transforms AI from a vehicle of assimilation into an instrument for cultural affirmation and decolonial futures (Ketere, ""Decolonizing Artificial Intelligence: reducing algorithmic" 390). The African Union"s Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy explicitly recognises that equitable artificial intelligence development will require indigenous knowledge systems, local capacity development, data governance as well as technological sovereignty (Ayana et al. 65). Postcolonial pragmatics contributes to this project by providing analytical tools for understanding how communicative practices are implicated in the reproduction or transformation of epistemic hierarchies.

The paper applies these theoretical resources to the study of *algorithmic amnesia*. The central analytical move is to understand algorithmic systems as pragmatic agents, not in the sense of conscious intentionality, but in the sense that they shape the conditions of communicative possibility. Algorithmic systems perform pragmatic functions: they determine what speech acts are recognised, what implicatures can be drawn, what contexts are relevant, and what forms of politeness and indirectness are intelligible. When these systems are trained on data that excludes African languages and cultural contexts, they systematically fail to recognise the pragmatic dimensions of African communication. The result is not merely the suppression of content but the deformation of the communicative context in which cultural meanings are produced.

This framework allows the paper to move beyond purely technical analyses of algorithmic bias to engage with the deeper philosophical questions at stake. As the Revue internationale des francophonies argues, the concept of scènes culturelles allows us to articulate the relationship between human and algorithmic agents at the heart of these phenomena (Zahar and Marcoux-Gendron). *Algorithmic amnesia* is not simply a problem of data or technology; it is a problem of communicative justice, of who has the power to define the conditions of cultural intelligibility in the digital age.

4.0. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a critical discourse analysis approach informed by postcolonial pragmatics. The methodology is qualitative and interpretive, focusing on the analysis of publicly available documents, scholarly literature, policy reports, and journalistic

accounts of algorithmic exclusion in Francophone Africa. The research design is exploratory, aiming to develop theoretical concepts and analytical frameworks rather than to test hypotheses.

Postcolonial pragmatics informs this analysis in three specific ways. First, it directs attention to how communicative norms are shaped by colonial histories and power asymmetries, guiding the analysis of how algorithmic systems reproduce these asymmetries (Bahrami 5083). Second, it emphasises the strategic dimensions of language use in postcolonial contexts, informing the analysis of how African users and communities navigate and resist algorithmic exclusion (Ketere, "Decolonizing Artificial Intelligence: reducing algorithmic" 377). Third, it provides analytical concepts, such as the indigenisation of communicative norms and the negotiation of multiple linguistic repertoires, that guide the interpretation of the data (Canagarajah 26).

The analysis proceeds in three stages. The first stage involves a critical review of existing literature on algorithmic memory, epistemic injustice, communicative justice, and postcolonial digital studies to establish the theoretical foundations of the concept of *algorithmic amnesia*. The second stage involves the identification and analysis of mechanisms through which *algorithmic amnesia* operates, drawing on empirical studies and documented cases from Francophone Africa. The third stage involves the development of the concept of *pragmatic sovereignty* through the analysis of resistance strategies documented in the literature and in policy documents.

Sources were selected according to three criteria. First, sources must be authoritative, drawn from peer-reviewed journals, university presses, international organisations, and reputable news outlets. Second, sources must be relevant to the research questions concerning algorithmic exclusion, cultural heritage, and Francophone Africa. Third, sources must be verifiable, with complete bibliographic information available for citation.

The study acknowledges limitations. The analysis relies on secondary sources rather than original empirical data collection. The case studies are illustrative rather than exhaustive, selected to demonstrate the range of mechanisms through which *algorithmic amnesia* operates rather than to provide comprehensive coverage of the phenomenon. Future research could extend the analysis through empirical studies of search engine results, recommendation algorithms, and content moderation practices in specific Francophone African contexts.

5.0. MECHANISMS OF ALGORITHMIC AMNESIA

Algorithmic amnesia operates through several interrelated mechanisms. The first and most fundamental is linguistic bias in training data. The vast majority of AI systems are trained on datasets dominated by English and a small number of other global languages. As UNESCO reports, AI-based technologies trained on content available in dominant languages appear to be less effective when it comes to producing output in Hausa or Zulu ("African Languages"). The consequences for Francophone Africa are particularly severe. As one study observes, thousands of languages are still not represented in AI, which has repercussions for health inequalities across Africa (Branda et al.). The absence of datasets in indigenous languages introduces a bias in algorithms (Branda et al.). An analysis of over 800 publications from 2019 to 2024 showed that the 20 most-studied African languages account for a major share of all research, with the vast majority of the continents over 2,300 languages receiving little or no attention (CLEAR Global).

The scale of this linguistic exclusion is staggering. As one analysis notes, a 2025 study of major large language models found that only 42 African languages appear with any meaningful presence, and just four, including Amharic, Swahili, and Malagasy, perform with real consistency (Kompas). This means that

more than 98 percent of Africa"s languages are essentially invisible to the moderation systems that decide what stays up and what gets removed ("Africa Has 2,000 Languages"). The consequences for cultural heritage are profound. Language is not merely a means of communication; it encodes the culture and worldview of its speakers ("African Languages"). When AI-powered technologies marginalise local languages, they weaken the cultural frameworks through which communities interpret knowledge ("African Languages"). The same dynamic applies to cultural heritage more broadly: when the languages in which cultural knowledge is encoded are invisible to algorithmic systems, the knowledge itself becomes inaccessible and, over time, forgotten.

The second mechanism is data asymmetry. Even when content in African languages exists digitally, it is often inadequately indexed, poorly transcribed, and insufficiently tagged with metadata. As Nonfon observes, a language or cultural production that is poorly documented, indexed, or referenced risks being less visible (Nonfon). This is not simply a matter of technical infrastructure; it reflects deeper structural inequalities in the global digital economy. The platforms that dominate digital content distribution, including Google, YouTube, TikTok, and Meta, are primarily designed for and optimised by markets in the Global North. As one study notes, platforms have chronically refused to invest in African languages, integrity systems and moderation capacity, which means the noise circulates freely while the systems that would protect serious discourse were never built for Africa at all (Cheeseman and Brian 5).

The third mechanism is the commodification of cultural expression. Algorithmic recommendation systems are designed to maximise engagement and profit, not cultural preservation. As Shoshana Zuboff argues in her analysis of surveillance capitalism, digital platforms reward predictability and behavioural conformity (Zuboff 8). In the African context, this results in a preference for Western beauty standards and the promotion of global pop culture over indigenous arts (Nonfon). The dynamic reinforces what one scholar describes as the commodification of cultural expression, whereby creative content is disciplined by market logic and platform imperatives. Young Africans increasingly adapt their cultural expression to fit algorithmic expectations, shifting from communal authenticity to platform performance (Cobbe 741). This process of cultural adaptation is not neutral: it privileges forms of expression that are legible to algorithmic systems trained on Western content, while marginalising forms that require contextual and pragmatic knowledge to interpret.

The fourth mechanism is the reconfiguration of cultural memory. As Cobbe argues, algorithmic systems function not merely as tools for organising information but as socio-technical infrastructures that actively participate in shaping collective memory (Cobbe 741). When certain cultural expressions are systematically ranked lower, recommended less frequently, or moderated more aggressively, they gradually disappear from the digital landscape. This is what the paper terms *algorithmic amnesia*: not the intentional erasure of content, but its gradual fading from collective digital memory through the operation of algorithms that were never designed to recognise or preserve it. As Murjanatu Abba observes, digital platforms are no longer just communication tools; they are becoming the primary environment where African cultural memory is preserved, interpreted and contested (Abba). The question, she argues, is no longer whether storytelling will survive, but who controls its form and meaning (Abba). A recent study on digital amnesia and algorithmic memory confirms that algorithmic archives not only preserve information but actively curate and reinterpret history through patterns of visibility and omission, meaning that memory in the age of big data is not neutral but performative, marginalising some narratives while amplifying others (Garuda).

The fifth mechanism is content moderation. As Mbongeni Jonny Msimanga notes, platforms like Facebook and TikTok only monitor and police content in eight African languages across a continent of over 1.5 billion people speaking close to 2000 tongues (Msimanga). This digital exclusion not only endangers online safety but also reinforces linguistic and cultural marginalisation in African digital spaces (Msimanga). Content moderation systems trained primarily on English-language data fail to recognise culturally specific forms of expression, resulting in the erroneous removal of content that is perfectly legitimate in its original context. Conversely, harmful content in African languages may go undetected, creating a double bind: legitimate cultural expression is suppressed while harmful content proliferates.

These mechanisms operate together to produce what the paper calls *algorithmic amnesia*. The term captures the systemic nature of the phenomenon: it is not the result of any single decision or policy but emerges from the interaction of multiple structural factors. This digital erasure is the equivalent of the historical processes of cultural erasure that characterised colonialism, operating not through overt violence but through the quiet, incremental withdrawal of visibility and recognition.

6.0. CASE STUDIES FROM FRANCOPHONE AFRICA The Discoverability of Francophone African Music

The first case concerns the discoverability of music from Francophone Africa. Découvrabilité is a concept that has become central to Francophone digital policy debates. As the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie defines it, discoverability refers to the capacity of content to be found, identified and recommended in the immensity of the digital (Nonfon). The OIF has been active in documenting the challenges facing Francophone cultural content, particularly from Africa, and has found that African music faces systematic disadvantages in algorithmic recommendation systems.

The reasons for this disadvantage are multiple. First, music from Francophone Africa is often inadequately tagged with metadata, making it less likely to be surfaced by recommendation algorithms. Second, the linguistic diversity of Francophone Africa, which includes not only French but also Wolof, Bambara, Fon, Lingala, and hundreds of other languages, means that content in these languages is poorly represented in training data. Third, the platforms that dominate music streaming, including Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube, are optimised for Western markets and genres, with algorithms that privilege English-language content and Western musical forms.

The consequences are significant for cultural heritage. As the Congolese music industry has observed, discoverability is earned when algorithms unpromptedly surface a song to listeners who did not know they needed it ("African Music Discoverability"). When algorithms fail to surface Francophone African music, artists lose audiences and revenue, and the musical traditions they represent lose visibility and vitality. The Festival Panafricain de Musique has highlighted this issue, noting that a song in Fon, a sound archive in Yoruba, or a traditional narrative all risk becoming invisible if they are insufficiently represented in digital data (Nonfon).

From a postcolonial pragmatics perspective, this case illustrates how algorithmic systems fail to recognise the pragmatic dimensions of Francophone African musical expression. Music in these traditions is not simply sound; it is embedded in social practices, communicative contexts, and cultural meanings that algorithms cannot access. A griot's performance, for example, is not merely a musical event but a speech act that conveys history, moral instruction, and social commentary. When algorithmic systems reduce this performance to a data point, a song to be recommended based on listening

patterns, they strip it of its pragmatic force and cultural significance.

6.1. The Preservation of Oral Traditions

The second case concerns the preservation of oral traditions. Across Francophone Africa, oral traditions, including proverbs, folktales, genealogies, and historical narratives, remain central to cultural transmission. These traditions are inherently pragmatic: their meaning depends on context, performance, and the relationship between speaker and audience. They are also inherently vulnerable in digital environments that privilege written text and decontextualised data.

A recent study by Ebiere Mathias examines the impact of AI on the preservation and transmission of African oral tradition, finding that while digital platforms such as audio and visual digitalisation, automatic transcription and translation, and metadata creation enhance accessibility, AI is best understood as a complementary tool that requires in-depth knowledge and communal ideology to ensure originality and authenticity (Mathias 24). As UNESCO observes, in many parts of Africa, education is not merely a transfer of academic information; it is a profoundly relational process through which communities pass down moral values, rituals, and worldviews to learners ("African Languages"). This relational dimension is precisely what algorithmic systems cannot capture. When oral traditions are digitised, they are often reduced to text transcripts that lose the performance context, the paralinguistic features, and the interactive dynamics that are essential to their meaning. When they are not digitised at all, they are simply invisible to algorithmic systems.

The concept of *algorithmic amnesia* is particularly apt here. As one study notes, the silence of AI on African terms is a form of algorithmic marginalisation that poses a direct threat to oral traditions, which are the very mechanisms through which knowledge, history, and moral codes are passed down ("The Digital Dilemma"). The threat is not simply that oral traditions will be forgotten but that they will be replaced by decontextualised, algorithmically-friendly forms of knowledge that lack the pragmatic richness of the originals. As the Cyber GRIOT project observes, given the absence of scriptural documentation in many African societies, the Enlightenment-era conception of history and oral memory represent distinct, often conflicting epistemological frameworks (Chatterjee and Dattagupta 30). Algorithmic systems, which are built on Enlightenment assumptions about knowledge as discrete, written, and universally accessible, are fundamentally ill-equipped to preserve oral traditions on their own terms. A study of AI and Yoruba oral performance similarly finds that while AI can enhance interactivity and accessibility, it also poses risks to the integrity of indigenous traditions, calling for a culturally sensitive and ethically grounded approach to AI integration (Oyetimi 80).

The challenge, from a postcolonial pragmatics perspective, is to develop forms of digital preservation that respect the pragmatic dimensions of oral traditions. This requires not only technical solutions, including better transcription, richer metadata, and more inclusive training data, but also a fundamental rethinking of what it means to preserve cultural heritage in digital form. As the African Union"s AI Strategy recognises, equitable artificial intelligence development will require indigenous knowledge systems (Ayana et al. 67). The preservation of oral traditions requires algorithmic systems that can recognise and respect the pragmatic contexts in which these traditions are embedded.

6.2. The Representation of Francophone Heritage in Search Engines

The third case concerns the representation of Francophone African heritage in search engines. Search engines like Google are the primary gateways to digital information for billions of users worldwide. Yet research has consistently shown that search

results are biased in favour of Western content and perspectives. As Safiya Umoja Noble demonstrates in *Algorithms of Oppression*, search engines like Google do not offer an equal playing field for all forms of ideas, identities, and activities but instead reinforce racism through the algorithms that determine what content is surfaced and how it is ranked (Noble 1).

For Francophone Africa, this bias has specific consequences. A search for information about a historic site in Senegal, a traditional practice in Mali, or a cultural figure from Côte d"Ivoire is likely to return results that are either in English or that reflect Western perspectives on these topics. As *La Nation* reports, for African media, artists and creators, content that exists but that algorithms rarely propose risks remaining largely invisible (Nonfon). The battle for visibility is, as the article argues, a battle over who has a chance of being found (Nonfon).

The consequences for cultural heritage are severe. When search engines fail to surface Francophone African content, users, both within Africa and globally, are deprived of access to this heritage. Over time, this creates a feedback loop: content that is not found is not linked to, content that is not linked to is ranked lower, and content that is ranked lower is even less likely to be found. The result is *algorithmic amnesia*: the gradual disappearance of Francophone African cultural heritage from the digital public sphere.

From a postcolonial pragmatics perspective, this case illustrates how search algorithms embody and reproduce colonial epistemologies. The ranking systems that determine search results are not neutral; they encode assumptions about what constitutes valuable, authoritative, and relevant knowledge that reflect the historical dominance of Western epistemologies. As Ayana et al. argue, AI systems that are not localised to Africa may leave out useful indigenous categories, practices and priorities while being treated as authoritative. When these systems are used to access cultural heritage, they systematically privilege Western sources and perspectives over African ones. The result is a form of epistemic injustice: Francophone African communities are denied the ability to define and represent their own heritage in the digital sphere.

6.3. Pragmatic Sovereignty: Strategies of Resistance

The analysis of *algorithmic amnesia* raises the question of resistance. How can Francophone African communities assert their communicative agency in the face of algorithmic exclusion? This section develops the concept of *pragmatic sovereignty* as a framework for understanding and advancing resistance to *algorithmic amnesia*.

Pragmatic sovereignty refers to the capacity of communities to define and control the conditions of their own communicative practice, both online and offline. It encompasses the ability to determine what counts as meaningful communication, what contexts are relevant, what forms of politeness and indirectness are recognised, and what speech acts are performed. This concept is not simply about access to technology; it is about the power to shape the pragmatic norms and infrastructures through which communication occurs. The concept builds on the broader notion of epistemic sovereignty that has become central to African digital policy debates, but it focuses specifically on the communicative and pragmatic dimensions of sovereignty. As Ooko argues, developing a decolonial framework for communicating about AI in Africa requires not only technical capacity but also the centring of indigenous knowledge systems as a way of addressing systemic exclusions of language, culture, and technology (Ooko 4).

Several strategies of resistance are already emerging across Francophone Africa. The first is community-led data practices. As one study notes, there is a need for community-led data practices, interdisciplinary collaboration, and context-aware evaluation frameworks (Faye et al., 5329). This means involving African communities in the collection, labelling, and curation of data,

ensuring that the data reflects their own categories and priorities rather than those imposed by external actors. The Masakhane project, for example, is a collaborative effort to develop African language AI resources through community engagement. By centring community knowledge and agency, such projects challenge the extractive logic of algorithmic colonialism. As Ketere argues, community-reported indicators, such as improved language pride, usage in family storytelling, or preservation of proverbs, can transform inclusion from mere optimisation to active reclamation (Ketere, "Decolonizing Artificial Intelligence: reducing algorithmic" 390).

The second strategy is the development of locally grounded AI systems. Ayana et al. argue that the challenge for AI in Africa is not limited to access to technologies but also extends to epistemic participation in the production, governance and validation of knowledge (Ayana et al. 65). This requires the development of AI systems that are designed with and for African communities, using datasets and architectures that reflect African linguistic and cultural realities. Initiatives like GhanaGPT, which supports localised curricula and local languages, represent important steps in this direction ("African Languages"). A study on preserving Awori and Ogu indigenous knowledge through a BERT-enhanced retrieval-augmented generation framework demonstrates the potential of retrieval-grounded generation to achieve high faithfulness scores and reduce hallucination compared to LLM-only baselines, while ensuring explicit provenance and abstention (Oyetimi 83). However, as UNESCO notes, such initiatives struggle with limited indigenous language data and are prone to hallucinations, fabricated translations, and failure to adequately interpret some concepts ("African Languages"). Addressing these challenges requires sustained investment in data collection and curation, as well as the development of evaluation frameworks that are sensitive to African contexts.

The third strategy is algorithmic resistance through everyday practices. As Ethan Plaut and others have observed, choosing not to optimise, not to be constantly visible, or not to comply with platform logics fully can be a form of algorithmic resistance (Plaut). For South African youth navigating precarious digital economies, this opens up a critical space between exploitation and empowerment, between visibility and invisibility, between participation and refusal (Plaut). This form of resistance is pragmatic in the deepest sense: it involves the strategic deployment of communicative practices to navigate and subvert algorithmic systems. African users and communities are not passive victims of algorithmic exclusion; they actively interpret, reshape, and evade algorithmic systems in ways that assert their communicative agency ("Living with Algorithms").

The fourth strategy is policy advocacy and regulatory intervention. The OIF has been at the forefront of efforts to promote the discoverability of Francophone content and to regulate algorithmic systems. The Déclaration d"Abidjan calls for more transparency on algorithms and for the integration of African languages into AI training data (AIP). The African Union"s Continental AI Strategy similarly emphasises the need for data governance and technological sovereignty (Ayana et al. 68). These policy initiatives are crucial for creating the structural conditions in which *pragmatic sovereignty* can be exercised. However, they must be accompanied by grassroots engagement and community-led initiatives to ensure that they reflect the actual needs and priorities of African communities.

The fifth strategy is the development of alternative digital infrastructures. There is a growing recognition that the digital platforms and infrastructures that shape African cultural production are largely owned and controlled by actors outside the continent (TechCabal). Initiatives like Muna TV, an AI-powered recommendation engine for African children"s content, represent efforts to build alternative

infrastructures that are designed with and for African users ("Muna Kalati"). By developing platforms that are grounded in African linguistic and cultural realities, these initiatives challenge the dominance of Global North platforms and create spaces for *pragmatic sovereignty* to flourish.

These strategies of resistance are not mutually exclusive; they are complementary aspects of a broader struggle for digital justice. What unites them is a commitment to what might be called communicative justice, the principle that all communities have the right to define and control the conditions of their own communicative practice. As Lazar argues, algorithmic intermediaries govern the digital public sphere through their architectures, amplification algorithms, and moderation practices, and political philosophy urgently owes an account of how to govern communication in the digital public sphere (Lazar 2). This paper argues that such an account must be extended to address the postcolonial dimensions of communicative justice. *Algorithmic amnesia* is a violation of communicative justice; *pragmatic sovereignty* is its remedy.

7.0. DISCUSSION

The analysis developed in this paper has implications that extend beyond the specific case of Francophone Africa. *Algorithmic amnesia* is a global phenomenon, affecting marginalised communities and cultural traditions worldwide. However, the Francophone African case is particularly instructive because it reveals the intersections of language, colonialism, and digital power with unusual clarity.

The first implication concerns the nature of cultural heritage in the digital age. The traditional understanding of heritage preservation as the physical conservation of artefacts and sites is inadequate for the digital era. Heritage is increasingly mediated through algorithmic systems that determine what is visible, searchable, and memorable. The preservation of cultural heritage therefore requires not only the digitisation of content but also the development of algorithmic systems that can recognise and respect cultural difference. This is a profound challenge: it requires moving beyond the universalist assumptions of algorithmic design toward a model that is genuinely pluralistic and context-sensitive.

The second implication concerns the relationship between technology and coloniality. The concept of algorithmic colonialism, developed by Birhane and others, captures the way in which digital technologies reproduce colonial power relations (Birhane 391). *Algorithmic amnesia* is a manifestation of this phenomenon: it is the mechanism through which colonial epistemic hierarchies are perpetuated in the digital age. As Ayana et al. argue, AI systems that are not localised to Africa may leave out useful indigenous categories, practices and priorities while being treated as authoritative (Ayana et al. 68). Resisting *algorithmic amnesia* therefore requires a broader project of decolonisation, not only of digital technologies but also of the epistemic assumptions that underpin them.

The third implication concerns the role of pragmatics in digital justice. Pragmatics has traditionally been concerned with the study of meaning in context, with how speakers and hearers negotiate communicative intentions and expectations. This paper has argued that pragmatics is also central to understanding digital injustice. Algorithmic systems are, in a sense, pragmatic agents: they shape the conditions of communicative possibility. When these systems fail to recognise the pragmatic dimensions of African communication, including proverbs, indirection, and contextual meanings, they render that communication unintelligible and therefore invisible. The struggle for digital justice is therefore also a struggle for pragmatic justice: for the recognition of diverse communicative norms and practices in the design and governance of algorithmic systems.

The fourth implication concerns the future of African cultural heritage. Without significant intervention, *algorithmic amnesia* will continue to erode the digital

presence of African cultural heritage. The languages, traditions, and practices that have survived centuries of colonialism may not survive the digital age. As one commentator warned, Africa"s new coloniser does not carry a gun, but is more powerful and dangerous ("Africa"s New Coloniser"). The new coloniser is algorithmic: it operates not through violence but through invisibility, not through prohibition but through neglect. If this process is not reversed, future generations may find that their heritage has been forgotten not because it was destroyed but because it was never digitised, never indexed, never recommended, never found.

The paper also identifies grounds for hope. The resistance strategies outlined above, including community-led data practices, locally grounded AI, algorithmic resistance, policy advocacy, and alternative infrastructures, demonstrate that *algorithmic amnesia* is not inevitable. African communities are actively working to assert their *pragmatic sovereignty* and to build digital futures that reflect their own priorities and values. These efforts deserve support and amplification. The task for scholars, policymakers, and technologists is to contribute to this project, to develop the theoretical frameworks, the technical tools, and the policy frameworks that can enable African communities to control their own digital destinies.

One might object that *algorithmic amnesia* is not a distinctive phenomenon but simply a manifestation of broader digital inequalities. However, this objection overlooks the specifically communicative dimensions of algorithmic exclusion. While digital inequalities certainly contribute to *algorithmic amnesia*, the phenomenon is distinguished by its focus on the pragmatic conditions of cultural intelligibility. It is not merely that African content is less visible; it is that the communicative contexts in which that content is meaningful are systematically misrecognised or ignored by algorithmic systems. Recognising this distinction is essential for developing effective responses.

8.0. CONCLUSION

This paper has introduced the concept of *algorithmic amnesia* to describe the systematic digital invisibility of Francophone African cultural heritage. It has argued that *algorithmic amnesia* is not a technical accident but a structural feature of digital capitalism and algorithmic colonialism, operating through linguistic bias, data asymmetry, commodification, reconfiguration of memory, and content moderation. It has developed a postcolonial pragmatics framework for analysing these phenomena, focusing on how algorithmic systems shape the conditions of communicative possibility for African communities. And it has identified strategies of resistance that point toward the possibility of *pragmatic sovereignty*.

The article's contribution to scholarship lies in three areas. First, it introduces the concept of *algorithmic amnesia* as a distinctive analytical tool for understanding digital cultural exclusion, distinguishing it from related concepts such as algorithmic memory and algorithmic colonialism by centring the communicative and pragmatic dimensions of exclusion. While algorithmic memory studies examine how platforms shape collective memory, and while algorithmic colonialism diagnoses the reproduction of colonial power relations, the concept of *algorithmic amnesia* focuses specifically on how the conditions of communicative possibility are shaped by algorithmic systems. It asks not only what is remembered or forgotten but how the pragmatic structures of digital discourse determine what can be communicated and understood.

Second, it develops a postcolonial pragmatics framework that connects the analysis of communicative practices to broader questions of power, coloniality, and epistemic justice. Third, it proposes the concept of *pragmatic sovereignty* as a framework for understanding and advancing resistance to algorithmic exclusion.

The stakes of this inquiry are high. Cultural heritage is not a luxury; it is the

foundation of identity, meaning, and community. The loss of cultural heritage, whether through physical destruction or digital erasure, is a profound harm. *Algorithmic amnesia* represents a new form of this harm, one that operates quietly and incrementally, through the ordinary functioning of the technologies that mediate so much of contemporary life. Recognising *algorithmic amnesia* is the first step toward resisting it. The second is to build the alternatives, including the data practices, the AI systems, the platforms, and the policies, that can sustain Francophone African cultural heritage in the digital age. As the OIF has argued, Africa cannot wait for its languages and narratives to be integrated into systems designed elsewhere. It must participate in the construction of the data, tools, and norms that will shape its digital visibility (Nonfon). This paper is offered as a contribution to that essential project.

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