

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Empowering African languages through publishing: whose responsibility?

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Abstract

This article describes the work of the Jalada Translation Project in promoting translation into and between African languages through networking, social media, print and digital publishing and in confronting issues of orthography and editorial process. The terms of debate have changed and multilingual publication is becoming more commonplace. The author asks where responsibility lies for African language publishing and raises questions for government policy and African philanthropy.

Résumé

Cet article décrit le travail du Jalada Translation Project pour promouvoir la traduction en langues africaines et entre ces langues à travers le réseautage, les réseaux sociaux et l’édition imprimée et numérique, et pour s’attaquer aux problèmes d’orthographe et de processus éditorial. Les termes du débat ont changé et la publication multilingue se banalise. L’auteur demande à qui incombe la responsabilité de l’édition en langues africaines et soulève des questions pour la politique publique et la philanthropie africaine.

I thank SCOLMA¹ for this opportunity for us to talk about African languages and reflect on some of the issues surrounding publishing work written in, translated into, or translated from African languages. I was in India for a publishing residency with Seagull Books in early 2020 when I learned of the theme of this conference. Seagull Books is based in Kolkata in Northeast India where publishing is very vibrant. And as I looked at the work being done, both by Seagull Books and other publishers and book printers, I could not help but think of all the excellent opportunities that could be harnessed back home. And especially, concerning publishing in African languages. I was awed by the care with which books are produced, with an eye both for content and design. I returned home earlier than expected because the world was suddenly

¹ This article was presented as the Keynote Address at the SCOLMA (UK Libraries and Archives Group on Africa) conference 2021: *Oun a ní la ní gbé l’árugẹ* – (It is the heritage we have that we must celebrate): publishing, collecting and accessing African-language materials.

faced with a global pandemic. Covid-19 would soon radically change many aspects of our lives, largely in bad ways but also with an opportunity to reconsider how we think about books, publishing and language. In this keynote I reflect on some of these thoughts, the conversations and the strides being taken to empower African languages through publishing.

Let me begin by telling the story of the Jalada Translation project,² a project that has in many ways shaped how we speak about translation, digital publishing, and the conversation between languages.

The story begins in 2015 when my colleagues and I at Jalada published a language issue. For those to whom the mention of Jalada is new, it is a Collective of Pan-African writers who came together in 2013 to make it easier to execute literary projects amongst ourselves. The Collective not only publishes work online, but also organizes many different activities that push further the conversation of writing focused on Africa and its diaspora. Though the 2015 language issue was one of our regular anthologies, we immediately felt the need to do more with African languages. We had sent out a call for submissions and received an overwhelming response. So, we published the language anthology in three volumes in September 2015 and followed with a bonus edition in early 2016. This was the beginning of our language and translation project. What we intended with that anthology was a celebration of language that featured fiction, poetry, visual art and various essays on the very subject of language. Writers were asked to submit original works written in their own languages, with a focus on African languages, and provide an accompanying English translation since Jalada is primarily an English-language journal. When it was published, it became one of our best received anthologies.

I was serving as the managing editor of the Collective then. In thinking about what we were beginning to do, I was moved to see how little was being done to publish work in African languages in emerging online and print spaces. Earlier that year, Ankara Press, an imprint of Cassava Republic Press, had published an anthology on Valentine's Day that featured romance stories translated from the original English to the respective authors' African mother tongues.³ This work was published online with free access to text, translations and accompanying audio recordings. There was not much more we could see online in terms of work published in African languages. In addition, the print publishers seemed to still hang on to the colonial model of publishing only school-prescribed texts. The ideal for a work published by a Kenyan publisher, for example, is that it will be adopted as a set book. And of course this makes financial sense. However, not a single African language, other than Kiswahili, is required reading in Kenyan schools beyond grade three. So, by default, publishers do not give the same attention to Kenyan language texts as to those in English and Kiswahili. In this context we thought of a way we could change the conversation, both in theory and practice. Here we were, a Collective of young writers, ready to answer some of the most important questions regarding inter-African language translation and publishing. And not just through conversation,

² See <https://www.nimdzi.com/the-jalada-translation-project/> and aladaafrica.org/2020/10/28/translation-project/, accessed 25 February 2022.

³ <https://africanwords.com/2015/03/05/the-valentines-day-anthology-a-snapshot-of-the-possibilities-and-challenges-of-african-publishing/>

but also in practice. We were not here to save the day, but rather to make a small contribution that could be a shining example to others. This was the beginning of a larger conversation about the possibilities of publishing African languages especially by taking maximum advantage of the digital facilities that are now available to us. We had the power of the internet on our side. We could harness the opportunities and the possibilities created by the internet to connect, work together, and publish online without incurring some of the extreme expenses that come with print publishing. And this is how, with the help of other Jaladans, conceptual work around the Jalada translation project began.

That year, in 2015, I initiated a conversation with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o through his son, Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was both encouraging and willing to work with us. A few months later, he sent us a short story in Gikuyu titled *Ituĩka Rĩa Mũrũngarũ: kana kĩa gĩtũmaga andũ mathĩ marũngĩ*. He later translated it into English as *The Upright Revolution: or why humans walk upright*. Through networks we had created via social media and the previous work of Jalada, I had conversations with many people about what we could do to get this story translated. I did not know that there was such enthusiasm and willingness from writers, translators, proofreaders and editors to engage with this work in their African languages. Within months of receiving the story, we had published the work in thirty-three languages. The *Guardian* (UK) ran a piece that declared the translation project not only as a pacesetter, but also historical in nature.⁴ *Ituĩka Rĩa Mũrũngarũ*, a story originally written in Gikuyu, had earned the title of the Single Most Translated Story in the History of African Writing. Through this work, the all-important question of translation between African languages was being practised and theorized.

In 'The politics of translation: notes towards an African language policy', a seminal essay in which Ngũgĩ reflects in part about the Jalada project, he noted:

the real breakthrough in the Jalada project is not just the fact of translation – as this has always been done – it is their emphasis on inter-African language translations. This centrality . . . from one African language to other African languages, is crucial if we are going to change the terms of debate and even the paradigm (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 2018).

But how did we manage to get that work done? When I think back to those initial days, it is the power of collective work that comes to mind. Of course, the idea had to start somewhere, in someone, and I as the vision bearer and editorial coordinator had to see it through. But after making the deliberate choice to pursue this concept, I soon realized that there was a community of translators across the African continent that had waited for an opportunity such as this. People wanted an avenue that could allow them to work together for the furtherance of African languages. In many ways, these participants had harboured their dreams of doing work in an African language or executed such dreams in their own spaces by themselves. Now they could see themselves as a part of a larger community of African language writers and translators. And who better to bring them together than the

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/mar/29/jalada-africa-short-story-ngugi-wa-thiongo-translated-over-30-languages-publication>

language warrior himself: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.⁵ The burden that they carried in doing work in their African languages no longer felt too heavy, too solitary, or even too lonely. They now knew that there were others, in countries spread across the continent and beyond, that gave the same commitment to work in their mother tongue as they did. It was this sense of collective labour that enabled a short story in an African language to achieve many firsts.

Today, the story originally written in Gikuyu has been translated into 100 languages. That is a century of languages that demonstrates that work in an African language can achieve a global impact. From South Africa to Tanzania, from DRC to Chad, from Algeria to Nigeria, Senegal and almost all the countries in Africa, people came together to showcase their languages in this space and through this shared project. Translations also came in native Mexican languages such as Tu'un sávi. And the process did not only attract individual translators, but also publishers who brought out the fable in print as children's books. In countries like the Gambia, Sweden, India and Chile, the work appeared in print publications.

In addition to publishing this story online and in print, there were also visual interpretations. The first was from Jalada's arts editor Marziya Mohammedali. Marziya created flame images that have become synonymous with the publication. In 2018, a group of Los Angeles based artists created a visual interpretation of the work through paintings and sculptures. This work has been exhibited in different galleries in cities across America. In different occasions over the years, the story has also been adapted for the stage and won the Sanaa Theatre award in Kenya for its theatrical adaptation. These multilingual performances were also done in different languages on various stages across East Africa and in other countries such as Sweden and Nigeria.

All this involved many people and a lot of work and has made this translation project an iconic representation of work in African languages. Because of this collective effort, many questions regarding translation from, into and between African languages were answered. Questions of orthography and editorial processes in different languages within one publication were also considered and answered both in theory and practice. It no longer seemed impossible to publish multiple African languages in the same volume.

Since then, we have witnessed many other publications opening themselves up to the processes of multilingual publishing that gave prominence to African languages. The best example is the recently launched South African journal called *Imbiza*. The first volume, which is published in print, featured poems in English, Sepedi and Tshitsonga; comics in English and isiZulu; and short stories in isiXhosa and Kiswahili. Another one called *Doek!*, the literary magazine from Namibia, is also committed to publishing work from writers working in Namibian languages. We are also seeing more traditional publishers putting serious work into African languages, and not just the lingua franca in their regions. For example, with support from both Dubai Cares African Publishing Innovation Fund and Nigerian home-grown Alitheia Capital, Cassava Republic Press announced the start of an African language imprint in 2019. The first phase of that initiative commissioned selected authors to write children's stories in Yorùbá, Igbo and Hausa. Shortly before that, East African Educational Publishers in Kenya had published a series of Kenyan language books for the

⁵ <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/ngugi-wa-thiongo-the-language-warrior-1/>

competency-based curriculum introduced for Kenyan learners. The languages featured included Kikamba, Gikuyu, Ekegusii, Dholuo and Kigiryama. Yet another brilliant example is from Senegal through the work of Boubacar Boris Diop. Diop, who is a scholar and writer, started an imprint in Senegal called *Ceytu*. This imprint is dedicated to the translation of seminal works by Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire and other prominent thinkers into Wolof.

What does all this tell us? While the majority of print and online publishing spaces across the continent continue to publish in English and other European languages, the few examples above show that an increasing number have incorporated work in African languages. Multilingual publishing is becoming common practice. And the mix of languages does not simply reach out to European languages, engaging English, French, Portuguese and German. It is now drawn to an eclectic mix of African languages. There is yet hope that with consistency of this kind of effort, African publishing can with time break free from colonial linguistic capture.

This is what I call a collective labour for African languages. Through such a process, we bring different African languages into conversation. However, we cannot assume that power in our languages can only be harnessed when taken together. It becomes a question of not only furthering individual languages, but also preserving some of those which face extinction. Each language has its place and can achieve global recognition. I would like to briefly give the example of a friend and fellow translator named Jane Bosibori Marando Obuchi. Bosibori Obuchi is a writer, researcher and teacher from Eldoret, Kenya.

Bosibori is among the early translators of *The Upright Revolution*. She translated this story into Ekegusii in 2017. Shortly thereafter, she began working in her mother tongue to write, translate and publish work in Ekegusii. She has written works for young school readers and translated classics such as *Romeo and Juliet* by Shakespeare, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, and *I will Marry When I Want* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Like many other writers from across the continent who write in their own languages, Bosibori faced one major challenge. Publishing. She had put her own resources into translating these works and getting them edited. Now, when she most needed a publisher, she could find none. But this did not deter her. She committed her own resources to ensuring that these books were published and distributed among her target readers. She marketed her books vigorously on social media. The power of social media to reach immediate audiences cannot be understated. Prior to the pandemic, she was willing to meet and engage her readers in discussion about her work in Ekegusii. Orders for the books not only came from her home area in Eldoret and Kisii, but from many places across Kenya and the diaspora where Ekegusii language speakers live. Faced with the absence of traditional publishing support, Bosibori decided that she would become writer, translator, publisher, distributor and promoter of her work in Ekegusii. But should this really be the case?

We acknowledge the absence and the underdevelopment of publishing infrastructure, especially in African languages, in most of our countries despite the previously mentioned examples. Individual efforts such as that of Bosibori can become a powerful exemplar for many. As we speak, Bosibori has gained global recognition, with organizations such as the Kemet Awards for Achievement in African Languages (KAAAL) set to give awards for her services to the Ekegusii language. Her work, she tells me, does not stop at the works of fiction. She is keen to start a publishing

firm primarily focused on the Ekegusii language that will publish work by herself and other writers and translators. Her publishing will consider work from many fields including biology, agriculture, economics and politics, all in Ekegusii. Bosibori's is an example of individual efforts that, if successful, demonstrates how publishing in particular languages can touch all spheres of knowledge production and consumption, as well as become a shining light for other African languages.

Bosibori is not alone in these efforts. As the Jalada Project demonstrates, people writing, translating, and publishing in African languages are spread across the continent. I'll briefly mention a few more examples. John Mambambo, a scholar from Zimbabwe, translated *Decolonising the Mind* into chiShona. His work was so impressive to Rhodes University that the institution is planning to expand this translation project into various other African languages. This is an institution of higher learning taking the leading role in ensuring that publishing in African languages is advanced. And rightly so because our universities across Africa should be the biggest cheerleaders of intellectual engagement in African languages through publishing, required readings, and giving space to scholars in our languages to flourish. When universities engage African writing in African languages, then we will deconstruct the impact of colonial education and its vestiges that continue to reject the very best of our homegrown solutions to the language question. Universities can train enough teachers equipped with the tools in African languages to educate the children in primary and secondary schools. As Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ notes in *The Rise of the African Novel*, such interventions by our institutions of higher learning will kill the notion of high premium on English and other European languages. African languages will be seen as equals and worthy of being part of university instruction, and by extension train instructors for young people (Ngũgĩ 2018).

Another example is that of Tuelo Gabonewe, a South African writer who has published two books in Setswana. In my conversations with him, he pointed out an important aspect of this work. Throughout the process of his writing in his mother tongue, he consulted with senior Setswana writers and elderly Setswana speakers to ensure that the language he was putting down on paper was as pure and as organic as possible. In essence, he had editors and proofreaders from among those he could trust the most with his language. For him, the difficult question of editorial processes in African languages found its solution. A similar process was employed by several translators who participated in the *Upright Revolution* project. We saw translators working with their parents, siblings, friends, professors and mentors who had a very good grasp of their languages to realize the translations and ensure that what was published was in its best shape. It is about all of us. It is a community process. We help the individual African language devotee to realize their dream, which is in fact our collective dream.

I need to mention that individual efforts are bold statements. These are statements about the preservation of individual languages, adding up to the collective responsibility for our African languages. However, any one person's commitment cannot hold in the long run given the nature of the book industry in Kenya and other African countries. In fact, as Zell (2018) notes, the enduring concern in writing and publishing in African languages is the financial one. Not enough financial resources are put into publishing in African languages. Jalada and other initiatives that have thrived often do so because of the determination of their members, and the willingness to pull

together the smallest resources available to make the work happen. Anyone who is committed to this kind of work needs help, and the kind of help that enables the entire publishing process to happen.

Over the past year, I have been working with the Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o Foundation as its Projects Officer. My work there is to map out ways in which we can support the work being done at individual and collective levels. By making it easier for people like Bosibori to produce and publish their work, we become partners in the production process of African language materials that many have shied away from. Bosibori and others like her have already demonstrated the commitment for their languages, and therefore support from organizations like the Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o Foundation helps to further the work that they are already doing. In essence, the foundation is developing capacity to support:

- those writing original work in an African language;
- those doing translations between African languages;
- writers and translators who are restoring into their African languages books by Africans that have already been published in English, French and Portuguese;
- those who publish translations from Caribbean and African American writing into African languages;
- those who publish any relevant classics from other world languages into African languages.

By supporting this kind of work, African languages are empowered. But a single foundation, or a single individual, or a collective of writers, cannot accomplish everything. We must look closely at other aspects that can contribute to creating a more conducive environment for African language publishing to prosper. What I mean is, we must continue to think about government policies and African philanthropy. Without political goodwill and increased policy and financial backing of African language publishing projects, our African languages will neither flourish nor take their rightful place in our production of knowledge (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 2018).

As for African philanthropy, I will give the example of the Safal-Cornel Kiswahili Prize for African Literature, which was established in 2014 and will be awarding its sixth annual prize later in the year 2021. I serve as the director of the prize, working alongside the founders Lizzy Attree and Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ to ensure that the success of this prize is a premier example for other African language prizes. Key supporters of this work are Mabati Rolling Mills in Nairobi and ALAF limited in Dar es Salaam, which are subsidiary companies of the Safal Group, the largest steel roofing company in Africa. These companies put substantial financial resources into ensuring that the work of the Kiswahili Prize stands as an example for those working in other African languages. They have ensured that funding for the prize has been consistent. However, not many other companies are coming on board as sponsors for African language prizes and publishing, so the scarcity remains.

Nonetheless, the best part of the Kiswahili Prize is the opportunity to publish the winning works. Mkuki na Nyota Publishers from Tanzania and East African Education Publishers from Kenya have been publishing the winning entries. The winning poetry is also translated into English and published by the Africa Poetry Book Fund. Indeed,

African philanthropy can make a great difference in ensuring that publishing in African languages becomes both vibrant and sustainable. Such philanthropy demonstrates that African languages are valued! That they not only have monetary but also cultural value and significance. Such an award also ensures that the published works are marketed to reach a wider audience.

As I draw to a close, I would like to observe that all these are very important efforts. However, they stand the risk of sounding elitist and self-righteous if they do not engage the ordinary citizen at the grassroots level. We cannot speak about publishing and empowerment of African languages without thinking of those who use these languages every day. The books and the writing that is being done in their languages must be able to reach them. By this I mean that whatever distribution systems are adopted should target these people as the primary readers. Ways have to be found to sell books directly to the people because their lifestyles rarely lead them to bookstores. And in any case, in many towns and localities across Kenya, and this is true for other African countries, there are few bookstores, and those that exist mostly sell commercially viable school textbooks. Any publishing of books must factor in ways to make these books directly available to the people, as close as possible to where they live, and price them in a way that is affordable for them. It is very exciting to see that many people across the continent are increasingly getting access to computing technology and smartphones are becoming commonplace. Publishers in African languages must make sure they take advantage of these technologies to reach readers through digital e-books.

Libraries play a key role in empowering African languages through making published materials accessible to students and scholars. And UK libraries have for a long time taken a leading role. While I am glad that this conference is expanding this conversation, however, it is my hope that we will hear more about different measures being taken to make archived materials a lot more accessible to people on the continent too. Perhaps also Africa-based scholars will be challenged to investigate and speak more about what libraries in Kenya and other African countries are doing to contribute to the availability of African language materials.

I remember last year reading a book called *Never Be Silent: publishing and imperialism in Kenya, 1884–1963*. The book is written by Shirraz Durrani and has documented much African language publishing that happened before independence. In my research, I did not find any similar book regarding publishing in African languages in Kenya post-independence. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has spoken about the history of post-independence publishing in Kenya, noting that the KANU regimes that took power following Kenyan independence perpetrated enormous ideological crimes against the Kenyan people and their languages. As Durrani documents, pre-independence Kenya had a vibrant publishing culture of newspapers and magazines in African languages. But after independence, the KANU regimes crushed most of the efforts to publish in African languages. They ensured there was no meaningful publishing of materials in any Kenyan African languages (Durrani 2006). What was much more important to me as I read the book though was the vision that the books and magazines that Shirraz Durrani documented be found and digitized in a manner that would increase access to as many Africans on the continent as possible. This will serve as inspiration to many of us who need to know that when we do the work of publishing in African

languages, we stand on the shoulders of giants, guided by the work of those who have come before us.

We live in a continent of more than a billion people with over 2,000 languages. Whose responsibility is it, therefore, to ensure that publishing in African languages is done, and achieves the best outcome? Is it the individual writer or translator navigating a publishing environment that does not adequately support his or her publishing dream? Is it the collective of writers coming together to found spaces and take advantage of digital facilities to maximize impact? Is it the emerging print or online magazines that work with limited resources and are continually faced with the fear of folding any time? Is it the traditional publisher who must find ways to fund a publishing venture that is usually viewed as not being commercially viable? Is it governments' responsibility to ensure that policies are not just instituted but are properly executed in support of African language publishing and education in African languages? Is it the role of African philanthropists to solve the important puzzle of ensuring consistent funding for African language publishing and related projects? Or is it the book distributor who must not only place faith in African language books, but also find fresh and innovative ways to get the book into the hands of the people? Or maybe it is the role of the citizen at the grassroots level? And if so, who inspires, guides the process, and ensures it is not in chaos? Really, who among them all bears the heavy responsibility of decolonizing decades of neglect of publishing in African languages?

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