

# Endangered Languages / Endangered Africa

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Endangered languages? What about an endangered continent? The litany of contemporary African horrors is familiar: brutal colonialism, neocolonial terror, epidemics, mass starvation, intractable poverty, widespread war, genocide, too many tyrants, murderous debt, colossal corruption and so much more.

But African languages tell a different story.

In the words of Africa's declaration of language independence, "The Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures" (2000), "despite all the odds against them, African languages as vehicles of communication and knowledge *survive* and have a written continuity of thousands of years." Furthermore, "African languages...take on the duty, the responsibility and the challenge of speaking for the continent," recognizing "a profound incongruity in colonial languages speaking for the continent," languages that the vast majority of Africans do not speak.

African languages are not simply a medium. African languages are the message. African languages are

- Africa's greatest resource
- an alternative vision of development in Africa
- the simplest, fairest, most democratic, economic and achievable way to improve African lives and livelihood through the application of knowledge, education, science and technology
- the most important African source of traditional and future social change, economic development and individual self-realization.

Yet the recognition of African languages is still only a part of a much larger movement to create a pioneering, global and free conversation among all languages, literatures and cultures towards discovering and mapping a kind of universal, verbal genome in which humanity itself is writing its own life's story.

Take, for example, the poets of Eritrea. As one of Africa's greatest writers, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has said, who himself this year will publish his own global epic, *The Wizard of the Crow* (Pantheon) written in Gikuyu and translated by him

into English, "for at least four thousand years — from the ancient stele in Belew Kelew to the 20th-century battlefields of Eritrea's heroic struggle for independence — and into the 21st century, Eritrean poets have never given up writing in their own languages, which is why their poetry thrives."

Modern geneticists have linked all human beings to a single migration of a few hundred people out of Africa roughly 65,000 years ago (*New York Times*, 5/25/05). Modern linguists say that human beings developed the full capacity to use language approximately 100,000 years ago, again in Africa. Announcing the successful mapping of the biological genome, Francis Collins of the National Institute of Health characterized the event as "the revelation of the first draft of the human book of life" (*New York Times*, 6/27/00). Bill Clinton, president at the time, claimed "today we are learning the language with which God created life." If God did speak such a language, it sounds like it had to be African!

Of course there are many great African novelists and poets in European languages like English, French and others, but in African languages there are far more, including age-old traditions of oral storytellers and poets — *griots, griottes, djalis, geTamo, geTempti* — throughout the continent. Furthermore, the list of African language artists — written and oral — is long and growing everyday, but who knows them?

To approach this problem from a different perspective: What would a reader be missing if he or she were only reading European Renaissance authors writing in Latin when Dante, Rabelais, and Shakespeare were writing in their own vernaculars? Precisely this — only in African vernaculars not European — is what we are missing now. For example, they sing in Yoruba: *Elewa — Asawa*; Zulu: *Enbumba — Entutugo*; Tigrinya: *Quanquana — Mennetna*; Kiswahili: *Lugha Yetu — Sauti Zetu*; Shona: *Kubetana*.

Our mother tongues, our own,  
Our flesh, blood and bone —  
The words we sweat and write,  
Our mirror and the light,  
The whole world we can say.