

# PRACTICAL VISION

**Moses Kilolo (KE)** is a writer and the managing editor of Jalada, a Pan-African writers Collective that has become an important literary (virtual) space and network for African writers and artists from the continent and beyond. Moses conceptualized and provided the editorial coordination for the inaugural Jalada Translations Issue, which features the single most translated short story in the history of African writing. Alongside co-curators, he conceptualised the inaugural Jalada Festival, and headed the team in executing Africa's first mobile literary and arts festival that made stops in twelve towns across five countries in twenty-eight days. Moses has participated in festivals around the world to speak about his passion on the practical work of promoting African language literatures. He has written for the English PEN, Saraba Magazine, and many others.



## JALADA

A few weeks back someone told me that it is an exceptional achievement for a short story to be translated into a dozen languages. I had never really thought about it, as I am not drawn from a long tradition of scholarship in literary translations. I could not quantify his statement in any way. For me those words came across as a big compliment given the scope of the work done by the Jalada Collective in the past year in the area of translations and the use of digital facilities.

Jalada is a pan-African collective of young African writers from all over the African continent, of which I am member as well as the managing editor. It began in 2013 during a workshop convened by renowned editor, Ellah Wakatama Allfrey. We had a lively conversation among the participants about what we as young African creatives drawn from different geographical locations could do with the resources we valued: language, knowledge and our web of connections. So Jalada was born. From wherever we were, we worked together online in what seemed like a virtual office. All you needed to do was post a message, and another member would take action. The Internet became an enabler of collaboration and a resource in the production process of a digital Jalada magazine. Our first thematic issue tackled the often-underexplored subject of mental health within the African context. Our second anthology focused on stories of fictionalized sexual experiences in ways that broke the implied modesty of our fictional boundaries. We also did an anthology on Afrofutures, a publication that allowed us, as Africans, to capture multiple and alternative ways of imagining futures.

## THE TRANSLATION ISSUE

Then, we embarked on a translation project in which we aimed to have one short story translated into as many languages as possible. Since March 2016, when we first published the story *Ituika Rīa Mūrūngarū: Kana Kīrīa Gītūmaga Andū Mathīi Marūngīi*<sup>1</sup>, the story has been translated into sixty-eight languages. The initiative has been critically lauded by several scholars as one of the most essential projects in fostering communication amongst readers and speakers of different languages across the globe. Under the umbrella of the powerful magic of storytelling, online publishing has enabled different languages and cultures to find expression and converse with

1. Translated into English by the author, Prof. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, as *The Upright Revolution: Or Why Humans Walk Upright*

each other. The Jalada website, where the story and its translations are published, acts as a kind of portal to a multiplicity of languages wherein you can find codified languages you may never have heard about. Because for us at Jalada we are keen on multiple narrative modes of textual and visual storytelling, the story continues to be available in podcasts and live multilingual dramatizations.

We conceptualised the Jalada translations issue with a specific focus on African Languages. Each language remains a representation of a specific culture on the continent. Taken together, our continent is infinitely rich in its cultural resources. Over 2000 languages exist across the 54 nations. Imagine the monumental impact of a story in all these languages. It would be an immovable symbol. In history and in scholarship it would stand as a testament to the fact that all languages are equal: It does not matter the origins, the color, or the number of people who use any specific language, nor the standardisation of such a language or the lack thereof. The coming together of all those languages would smash any doubt that in our diversity immense beauty can be created with a great and lasting impact.

Jalada Translations issue was born from the firm faith that one day, whether it is during my lifetime or in the generations to come, one such short story will exist in all African languages. I want to imagine that over the years the spill over effect of this will transform our attitudes towards the use of our mother tongues and the languages that we learn from our neighbours through our daily interactions. I want to imagine the impact it might have on the access that our children have to texts written in all manner of languages, especially the marginalised languages. We continually learn to reap from the resources that we have. One such irrefutable resource is the language of our mother tongues.

### THE ILLUSION OF UNIFYING LANGUAGE

Some of the distinctive African languages represented in the translations issue have suffered many years of non-representation in the written form. There are worrisome statistics of the number of books or articles that have been published in these languages. Yet, across many countries and regions within the continent, thousands, tens of thousands, or millions of people use these languages every day. They transact businesses, they pray, they love, and dream of love and life in these languages. And yet, so little is written in them. What is even more worrying is the fewer number of people who get access to these written resources. Most of the written material is in European languages - English, French, and Portuguese - as well as a few dominant African national languages.

The illusion of unifying a nation through a single language is wide spread. This has meant a very deliberate marginalisation of African languages and the almost brutal emphasis on the spread and dominance of English or other European languages. Additionally, we feed on that illusion instilled in us by our education

systems, which were designed by European colonialists to serve the empire and then continued as desirable norms by post-colonial governments. But there is a daily struggle from many quarters and initiatives to effect change in our school systems.

Today, one does not need to go to a well-equipped library to see texts in other languages. You only need to log into social media, and you will see the flow of conversations in all manner of languages, albeit a little inconstant. We do not have to look at that with suspicion. We do not have to feel hate and resentment for the existence of the other or feel burdened by the colonial idea that this is divisive. Over the years, I have noted how many young Nairobians flood institutions to learn French and German. We marvel at the possibility of acquiring what is not necessarily ours. That in itself is a beautiful thing; all knowledge is power. However, most of the individuals learning these languages will never go to France or Germany. They will use that resource they have attained amongst themselves in a very small circle, or for employment purpose such as to serve the occasional tourist or to work at one of the multinationals. Even worse, sometimes it is never put to use. It exists merely as a placeholder in a Curriculum vita or for prestige, such as when someone mentions that they have studied this or that European Language. In their minds they remain psychologically arrested in the desire and continually gravitate towards the European home of the new learned language. However, they will interact very occasionally with speakers of other African Languages. What if that beautiful desire to learn and appreciate a foreign language was also inherently directed towards other African Languages? In failing to have enough systems that can facilitate this kind of interest and indulgence, the online publishing of stories in different languages, multilingual performances, and podcasts are a small but possibly vital contribution. Not just for readers that want to read other languages, but those who have grown up with very little exposure to written texts in their own mother tongue.

## PRACTICAL VISION

Ngugi wa Thiongo has used the term *practical vision* to describe the fresh opportunities for disseminating African literature that the digital age makes possible. Practical vision is about activating dreams in the present; it is about translating a vision that seems at far distance into a doing that brings you there. What we envision, is building a future of multilingual pride and connections that know no boundaries between writers, publishers, and readers. And because of our access to and connectivity with the Internet, we are able to move beyond mere conversations towards the execution of ideas. This however requires grit and a lot of help from all corners.

If we had done the Translation Issue in the pre-internet age, it would have taken us decades and huge financial means to put it together. The web of translators grew because of my colleagues and interested participants who encouraged others to contribute

to the bringing together of sixty-eight languages into one volume. The volume bears the hallmark of conversations between cultures, languages, and people of the world. Thanks to the generosity and time invested by the writers and translators we were able to do this work efficiently in less than a year.<sup>2</sup> Our ways of consuming information have changed radically since oral literature was shared around a bonfire in early evenings. As publisher Jalada therefore tries to understand the changing nature of communication and the resultant structures. We want to find ways to take full advantage of digital facilities as it is the reality of our generation and of those to come.

We continue to experiment with many more ways to tap into these digital facilities to share stories in all manner of African Languages. The current question is how we can have a continued publication of translations, that allows a conversation between the languages of Africa and those of the world. Can we create a digital publication that captures the infinite resources in our languages and cultures? In order to meet this challenge, we decided to select one short story a year – short enough to allow a relatively ease of work in terms of translation – that is powerful enough to speak across multiple cultures. Our vision is to have each story translated into as many African Languages as possible. And one day, in the not so distant future, we will have an online archive of stories and translations in all manner of languages. Pursuit of such a vision is not easy. There is a great deal of misconception about African Languages and their places in our personal and communal intellectual discourse. In our contribution to improving the publication of, as well as encouraging readership of works in African languages we needed to lay a firm foundation. First, we recognise that there are voices that have come before us who have already done a great deal to fight for language rights. Our selection of a story by Ngũgi wa Thiong’o was a recognition towards those who had taken responsibility for our languages. As practical visionaries, interested in turning ideas into actions, we work with full acknowledgement of what has come before. We take into consideration the conversations that have been held on the subject, and bring these further by pursuing our translation work in ways that examine barriers of the past and find ways to overcome them now.

Just as we have created and continue to create a database of literary translators, we want to establish a base of devoted readers. Earlier in the process, someone was quick to ask me, rather sceptically, what happens after we have published the translations and who will even be interested in reading them? Once the first

2. To be a part of the Translation Issue as a translator is to put yourself in the company of other translators making history. We publish each translation on a single page. The language, name, and biography of the translators are the credits listed. We do not discriminate, nor require any advanced experience in literary translation. The only requirement is the desire to produce authentic and verifiable translations that can communicate a story in one’s own language. And while we do not compensate financially for now, we are looking into possibilities of funding and developing a financial model that would allow the sustainability of the work. As we engage more and more translators, the network grows, and opportunities are easily spread across the team for the benefit of diligent translators.

Translation Issue was published, the translators and our most devoted readers started sharing the work on Facebook, Twitter, and Blogs while expressing their excitement at seeing such a publication. People tweeted links and shared specific languages on their timelines. A twitter user in Ethiopia, @LindaYohannes, tweeted: "Reading Ngugi in #Amharic! This feels so right!" Digital technologies helped us tap into greater and faster possibilities whereas the mere exhaustion of putting together the volume in print form would have been enough excuse for us to store the print copies in the warehouse for a month or two before venturing into marketing and distribution. The reality of such exhausting stretch of time in the production process was for a long while the reason why people kept stuck in conversation and never got into doing.

### **CREATING DIGITAL NETWORKS FOR TRANSLATION**

The connection that is formed between the writer and publisher is quite important, but the connection formed with reader is also crucial. We know by now that there are people across the continent and in the diaspora who believe in the importance of marginalised languages. Perhaps in their love for the translated stories and the process of translation, they too will be inspired to write and translate. In practise, this collective effort will call for a continuous and growing engagement with multi-linguistic storytelling practices. Vigorous social media campaigns and the sharing of the work in all possible media will enhance such reciprocal relations. Also the collaboration with universities and other learning institutions, can create interest or integrate the idea of African languages in research and teaching practises. We find it especially important that children grow up with multi-lingual content and digital facilities will make access possible at a minimal cost. We believe that a generation of young people with a passion for their languages, whatever these languages may be, will be here to hold this vision together for a very long time. To grow that generation we must continue to encourage those among us with the intellectual facilities and various experiences to participate in projects such as the Jalada translations issue. New translators will get the space to experiment with their abilities. And those who have already made attempts in prior translation issues will have the opportunity to continue in a supportive environment that allows their talents to grow.

An important step in executing such a practical approach in the area of translations is to keep a good connection between different players: the writers who are interested in different languages, the translators who value the great power in the stories, and the various publishers who have demonstrated their willingness to disseminate these works further and further. This would not be possible without the connections and collaborative processes we have put in place. At the heart of our practical vision lies a growing network of connections, without which ideas would remain mere ideas. Adapting the structure of digital media - as a web of connections -

onto our way of working allows for the perseverance and sharing of our valued resources: languages and the knowledge they carry.

## THE FUTURE IS MULTI-LINGUAL

However, despite the crucial importance of digital platforms we have seen that the work can grow into more than digitally published pieces once they have reached a widespread audience. From its digital space, Ngūgi wa Thiong'o's story has been adapted for the stage on several occasions. Each dramatization celebrated the power of cultural diversity in imagining better worlds. Secondly, the story has also gone into print. In Sweden as a children's book; for the occasion of the Mboka Festival of Arts Culture and Sport in three Gambian Languages (Wolof, Mandika, and Fula); and publishers across Spain will print editions in Spanish, Catalan, Galician, Basque, Bable, and Occitan. From digital to stage, to print and then back into the digital realm: In India, a print publication of a translation in Kannada, a Dravidian language, was later republished in an Indian online magazine that reached a few million readers. In the USA, the story was nominated for a project that aims to make short digital eBooks available on the subway for a year. There are more than six thousand nine hundred more languages across the world, and so the story travels. In the future, we hope to see the translators that we work with move on to bigger challenges. For them to take up translation of fictional and non-fiction books. While shorter works can be read much more easily online, actual books may require print publication, and in this sense, the digital and the analogue co-exist in mutual advantage.

Over the course of ten years we envision having ongoing translations of about ten different stories. With each story translated into a hundred or more languages, we will have made it a normal practise to write and translate into and between African Languages. With this practice comes the idea of conversation between the languages as they appear alongside each other. The beauty is in the use of any known language anywhere in the world with confidence and the faith in the good of what is your own, and respecting the faith and confidence of the other in using and celebrating what is theirs.

And this is the future: a place for practical visionaries. A time of multilingual pride and connections that know no boundaries between writers, publishers, and readers. When we act out our ideas, the future will smash the difficulty of access through digital technologies; the exclusion of languages through translations; and the limitations of opportunities through the growth of collective work. We will wake up one day soon and feel the light of possibility shine upon our faces. And because the 'Upright Revolution' of digital innovation is inevitable, the publisher, the writer, the translator and the reader - who wants the works to survive and remain relevant - must find ways of taking advantage of the digital technologies at their disposal.







