



**LITERARY TRANSLATION, LITERACY AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Writing is a means for the preservation of information. The written literary text, as opposed to the oral, exploits and deploys all the possible resources of a language in order to recount the way of life of a society or people, thereby creating a durable heritage for posterity. Such literary creation, when it is in the indigenous language(s) of a given society is what should be recognized as the national literature(s) of that society or country. The literary texts of the majority of south Saharan African countries are written in the foreign languages that became the official languages of these countries following the colonial experience. These official languages are poorly mastered by the majority of the African population and therefore the texts written in them are not accessible to this majority. Thus, the benefits of literature are lost on them. But these countries possess their various indigenous languages which still serve as popular means of communication for the peoples. We contend that if the existing literary texts in foreign languages are made accessible to the majority of Africans through translation, the impact on it would help to bring about the much needed human development in most countries of the continent. This is due to the perceived usefulness of literature as an instrument of both human and language development. The Development Program of the United Nations is used as a basis for measuring human development.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Literature exists in every language. It is an instrument of culture. Whether in the oral or written form, the literature of any society originates from within that society and exists in the language of that society. The true literature of a people or society would be that which is composed in the language(s) of the people or society and which exploits every aspect of the life of the society in question to produce a work of art. The African continent boasts of thousands of languages belonging to the different countries and regions, but a census of these languages that possess orthographies that could be used in literary composition would reveal a startlingly low figure. Many factors account for this state of affairs, the major one being the colonial experience of the continent which saw to the relegation of Africa's indigenous languages to the status of inferior and uncivilized means of communication, unfit for official use or as languages of instruction in schools. Africans were taught and made to believe that their languages were good for nothing. They therefore embraced the foreign languages at the expense of theirs. Many decades after independence, the situation remains unreversed. The indigenous languages of the continent were emasculated, being denied the opportunity to develop due to lack of use.

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This situation has led to the endangerment faced by most of these languages. Some of the languages of the continent, like the Igbo language of the South East of Nigeria, are in danger of extinction, if the predictions of UNESCO in 1994 and the UN in 1987, are anything to go by (<http://www.tribuneonline.com/will-igbo-language-go-into-extinction>).

Thus, according to Maduka (2005; 6), with the rare exception of Kiswahili, no other African language has the status of a national language in any country of the continent. Emenanjo (2005; 5), on his part, maintains that "of the 2000 odd languages spoken in Africa, only three qualify as regional lingua francas: Swahili in Eastern and Central Africa, Arabic in North Africa and Hausa in West Africa". This state of affairs is unwholesome and needs to be reversed beginning with efforts to maintain the existing languages through use. Part of the effort would be to encourage literacy in the indigenous languages of the continent especially among the adult population. When this population begins to read and write in their mother tongues, the experience would impact positively on various aspects of the African society. The human development rating of most countries would improve as literacy is a key factor in human development.

Among the principles for calculating the indices for human development figure is knowledge which is measured by the adult literacy rate and the combined primary, secondary and

tertiary gross enrollment. However, with regard to literacy in Africa, a person is considered literate only if the individual can read and write in the official language of the country in question, and invariably, that language would either be English, French or Portuguese, all foreign languages. According to Felix-Emeribe () the status of literacy should be imputed on anyone who can read and write in any language, and not only to those who can do so in some European language. There is a link between literacy and human development that can be mediated through the consumption of literature in the indigenous languages.

Presently, there is a dearth of literary texts in African languages. This is as a result of the years of neglect of the local languages which also saw to the rise of production of literary works in the foreign languages by Africans. This situation can be reversed if attention is given to the development of indigenous languages of Africa by developing their orthography, by engaging in a fierce campaign against illiteracy by encouraging the adult populations to learn to read and write in the languages of their regions. When these are done, before long, creative works in those languages would begin to flourish. But before then, this paper proposes the translation of already existing works (by African authors) into the continent's languages to provide reading materials for the adults (and children) who are beginning to read and write in their mother tongues.

The following paragraphs are reflections on the need to raise the literacy level of the majority of the African population through the reading of translated literature texts in the diverse languages of the continent. Because literature exerts a positive influence on readers, it is the view of this writer that this move would impact positively on the human development of the continent. The paper discusses the issues under such headings as Human development, literacy and human development, African elite and literacy in African languages, the literature as an agent of human development and finally translating literary texts.

### ***Human development***

The issue of development had for many years been considered only in terms of the economic progress of nations. Thus, the nations of the world were divided into two distinct groups—the developed and the undeveloped or developing nations. After many years, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) provided a departure from the emphasis on purely economic considerations. According to Obi (2017; ), a UNDP Report attributed the shift to the research in 1970 of two economists in, Professor Mehbuh al Haque and Professor Amartya Sen, who introduced the concept of human development. From then on, it was adopted by the UNDP, which, each year calculates and publishes the Human Development Index for countries in its Human Development Report (HDR). Thus, almost all the countries of the world are placed under three categories, high, medium and low, according to given parameters.

### ***The Concept of Human Development Index (HDI)***

According to the HDR, the HDI is a composite index that measures the average achievement of a country in three basic dimensions of human development namely:

1. Long and healthy living
2. Knowledge

3. A decent standard of living  
These dimensions are measured by certain indicators:

1. A long and healthy living is measured by life expectancy at birth.
2. Knowledge is measured by the adult literacy rate and the combined primary, secondary and tertiary enrollment.
3. A decent standard of living is measured by the Gross Nation Product (GNP) per capita in purchasing power parity.

Still, according to Obi (2017), this construction provides a measure that goes beyond the traditional measurement of development which is always based on income. The HDI is a barometer of changes in human wellbeing and for gauging progress in different regions of the world.

Human development concept is based on the idea of development as a freedom. It is aimed at building human capabilities to the highest attainable levels. Individual freedoms and rights are of great importance. But these are restricted for some individuals because of their conditions of poverty, ill-health illiteracy, of being discriminated against, threatened by violent conflicts or denial of political voice. In the inaugural issue of HDR in 1990, the authors defined the above indicators as essential choices and the absence of which can block many other communities. They submitted that Human Development is a process of widening people's choices as well as raising their level of well-being. Thus, development should revolve around people and not people around income. That is using income to create the enabling environment for people to attain desired heights in their aspiration.

### ***Literacy and human development***

Looking at the indices for the measurement of the average achievement of a country, this author considers the Knowledge dimension as the one that holds the key to the achievement of the other two. This is so because the level of knowledge possessed by an individual in the current century would be directly linked to his/her level of literacy, which, in turn, gives access to the kind of knowledge espoused in written forms as well as that garnered by hearing. These would invariably result in positive change in behavior. Since the change in behavior would conform to acceptable best practices, in hygiene, for example, a long and healthy life would result, which, itself, bears a direct link to a decent standard of living. Thus, for this author, the dimension of knowledge (literacy) should be at the head of the list, with a long and healthy life bringing thereat while a decent standard of living comes in the second place.

### ***African elite and literacy in African languages***

Literacy is thus the key to human development in this century. One of Africa's biggest problems and an endemic one at that, is the issue of very low literacy. As long as literacy is predicated on the mastery of the official languages of African countries, the problem will remain. The elite of the African countries are to be blamed for the current state of affairs with regards to the exclusion of indigenous languages from the scheme of things. There is a possibility that the so-called elite of the different countries, out of selfishness, would not push for a change in the status quo. They are in authority in government. They make the rules and implement them. They would not want to lose their position of supremacy by allowing

access to literacy through the mastery of the indigenous languages of the continent. This 'revolution' must be pushed for by those who understand the stakes.

A situation where all the tiers of government recognize the importance of indigenous languages and place them at par with the official languages, the local languages would have a chance to develop. The indigenes would use them with pride. Jobs would be created in such areas as the print tabloids, in the education sector, in translation, in the core commercial domains and in the new digital technologies. Creative literary talents hitherto locked up in many people would be unleashed. Literary and other productions in written form in the indigenous languages would flourish. The thousands of jobs thus generated would impact positively on the per capita income of the members of the various societies, thus raising their living standard and finally prolonging the life expectancy of the populations.

Thus we submit that literacy in the indigenous languages of Africa is a sine qua non for human development in the continent. The present situation where the official languages, which are actually just the lingua franca of the elite (Nnolim 2012; 4), and not really the national languages of the countries of the continent, are allowed to have the upper hand in the language policy of the continent, is not healthy. The vast majority of Africans continue to speak the various indigenous, regional languages. If this majority population is able to read and write in these languages, there would be a dramatic improvement in their lives. There would be free flow of information in print and otherwise in the African languages. The people would be able to receive, analyze and react to information in their own native languages.

Such could be the positive ripple effect in the African continent when the adult population becomes literate in their mother tongues and are having access to relevant life-transforming information in their own native languages. With the attainment of higher values in the achievement index in the various parameters for measuring human development, African countries would post, for once, a good showing vis-à-vis other countries in human development. These developmental strides could only become reality by a carefully planned action. We propose the use of literary texts in the indigenous languages to achieve this. One may ask why literary texts?

### ***The literary text or literature***

The literary text or literature, according to Nnolim (2012; 3) is... "that writing that is more emotionally moving than intellectually instructive, that writing that sets forth an imaginary world whose language is highly connotative rather than denotative, symbolic rather than literal, figurative rather than clear and whose supreme objective is to produce a satisfying esthetic effect and which creates for itself a justification as a work of art. Literature is that fictive composition that emanates from the imagination and which is endowed with a high quality of literality. It is always set in a society which gives it context. A literary work for Nnolim (2002; 3) always carries an idea, a philosophy that engages the reader in other people's experiences and gives him pleasure, knowledge and wisdom. Since literature is always based on a society, the author, in representing aspects of the society, deploys such resources of the language that are capable of painting the life of that society in the colours of his choice. If

the literature is merely oral, it cannot be conserved much longer than human memory can retain it. But if, on the contrary, it is written, its preservation and conservation are assured. It can then become a tangible and durable heritage for a society. When such a literature is composed in the indigenous language of the society it becomes a priceless heritage and would occupy a pride of place as a truly national literature of that society.

### ***The question of language of national literature***

Literary writers and critics in Nigeria, for example, have, at various times and fora, argued back and forth over the issue of the language of a national literature. Some have submitted that since the English language has been the language of literary composition since the era before and after independence, and that since the literary artistes have mastered it so well, that the literary compositions in the English language must be considered to be the national literature of the country. According to Achebe (Nnolim; 37), "English in the hands of our writers has surrendered itself to all kinds of use; it has been bent, proverbialized, pidginized, domesticated even vernacularized". But it is still the English language, comments Nnolim, who asks, "... must the Nigerian nation surrender itself to an eternal bondage to the English language? For Maduka (2005; 19), "Anglo-Nigerian literature, being a variety of world literature in English like Canadian, West Indian, Anglo-Indian, Australian, New Zealandian and American literatures, is a satellite of English literature..." When the roll of literatures in the English language is called, all the compositions in that language will answer present, irrespective of the nationalities of the authors.

We completely agree with Maduka (2005; 19) when he asserts that:

"National literature in Nigeria ought to be perceived comparatively by viewing it as the aggregate of themes and forms cutting across the literatures in Nigeria languages: ... geo-culturally speaking, there are several national literatures represented by the numerous linguistic communities in the country; accordingly, one has, for instance, Edo national literature, Efik national literature, Hausa national literature, Igbo national literature Yoruba national literature.

This view is valid for all other African countries whose true national literatures must be those written in the indigenous languages of the various language communities; Ashanti, Twi, Ganational literatures (Ghana), Themne, Krio national literatures (Sierra Leone), Fulfulde national literature (Senegal).

### ***Literature as agent of (general) human development***

Literature is useful. According to Dwight L. Burton (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/809866>) "in nourishing the imaginative flexibility essential to really social beings, literature makes a unique contribution to the general education which aims at the development of an informed and adjusted citizen. It is also an instrument for improving human relations..." Corroborating these ideas, Z. Hereford (<https://www.essentiallifefskills.net>) notes that through reading, we learn about ourselves. Through reading, we live through various experiences of others imaginatively, empathizing with the characters, see them solve problems, make mistakes, imagine better choices that they could have made and without having to experience the tragedies and difficulties and pain

ourselves, we broaden our understanding of human nature and human condition, It encourages open mindedness and flexible thinking, stimulates the mind, the imagination and creativity, providing a healthy escape while relieving stress and anxiety...”

As it concerns Nigerian literature, Nnolim (2005; 41) declares that :

...our writers have, through their works risen to the challenge of giving valency to our traditions and cultures by demonstrating through their work the logic in our traditional legal systems, the soundness in or healing ways, the meaning in our rituals and the beauty in our art...Our writers have used the power of literature as a moral corrective to ...human folly. (It is) a humanizing agent and an uplifter of our souls through its affective powers. Literature appeals to our sense of order, restraint and discipline, imparting in its wake a sense of decorum and proportion. Literature refines the behavior, moves us away from the path of vulgarity because a man educated in the humane letters is more likely to be a man of ethics, of lofty morals and a man of refinement.

Regarding literature in indigenous languages, Obi (2017) posits that it is an effective instrument of sensitizing and orienting people towards achievement of high human development index. It also creates a sense of national consciousness by exposing citizens to their history, geography and their literary acts at home and abroad. It affords the study and the preservation of our past and can yield enormous benefits to society

#### **Translating literary texts**

African authors have produced world class literary works in English, French and Portuguese, foreign languages that became official languages for African countries. These works, whether they are in prose, verse or dramatic forms, all present aspects of the history, geography, society, philosophy, culture and traditions of the various countries, regions and communities of the continent. They teach and entertain. Most of them have been translated into various languages of the world. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has been translated into over fifty languages of the world. It is striking to note that a majority of these works do not boast of versions in the mother tongue of even the writers. While the world attaches value to the literary works of Africans, Africans overlook them and chase after foreign things.

A new realization is dawning on African language experts and practitioners to return to the languages of the continent, to rehabilitate and develop them through using them. One of the ways of making use of the continent's languages is through translation – translating the literary works written by Africans first and then those written by other nationals, into the languages of the continent. NgugiwaThiong'o is showing the way by writing first in his native Kikuyu and then translating into English. (1986)

Translators and other concerned language practitioners with a sense of mission in the different countries could undertake, in the first instance, to translate works produced by their national writers, before taking on works by authors from other countries of their choice. Beginning with the simpler texts, such translated literary works could be proposed to the adult learners who are the target of our proposal. An organization, African Storybook ([www.africanstorybook.com](http://www.africanstorybook.com)) is already engaged

in the enterprise of producing open access stories in various indigenous languages of Africa with the aim of encouraging literacy in these languages.

#### **The proposal**

The proposal to reach out to the large illiterate adult population of Africa with literature in their mother tongues is hinged on the fact that the benefits are overwhelming. To begin with, adults who are embracing education tend to be very focused and committed to the task of learning and this ensures positive outcomes. Again, when the medium of instruction is their own local language, there is more likelihood of success because the element of mystification that goes with the use of a foreign language as a medium of instruction is removed.

Furthermore, the age factor would propel the adult learners to bring their life experiences to bear in the learning situation. In a situation of creation of stories in their indigenous languages, the adults, imbued with the oral folklore of their communities, would excel naturally. Listening to and then learning to read and write in their languages will become easy.

As the learners consume the familiar themes in the translated texts from their countries, they would be equipped and ready to read and learn about experiences from other climes. The studying of literary texts would naturally lead to the consumption of other types of translated documents in other subject areas, especially those in the areas of hygiene, health, environment, economic empowerment, brief, documents that enhance human development.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In this article, the issue of the need for literacy in the various indigenous languages of Africa was examined. A correlation between literacy in indigenous languages and Human Development as measured by the United Nations Development Program was made. The article strongly proposed the translation of literary texts written by African authors in foreign languages into various African languages as a fast means of creating a body of quality literary texts in the continent's languages for consumption by the vast illiterate adult populations who are embracing literacy in their mother tongues. The importance of literature as an agent of human development was also highlighted. The point was emphasized that literacy is the ability to read and write in any language and not just a function of reading and writing in the foreign languages that are presently the official languages of African countries.

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