



Senegal: Indigenous Language and Literature as a Non-profit Business

The ARED Story

Issue 13 of this series (“Sahelian Languages, Indigenous Knowledge And Self-Management,” October 1999) reasoned that literacy in African languages, now on the rise in a number of countries across the continent, provides an important vehicle for the expression and development of indigenous knowledge. Literacy and nonformal education programs throughout the region are giving a measure of public “voice”—at least at the local level—to community groups and associations that had none before. But they often run into one considerable obstacle: the lack of literature for new literates in the languages of instruction.

The problem is beginning to be resolved among Senegalese speakers of the Fulani or *Pulaar* language in some instructive ways. This article presents briefly the experience of ARED (Associates in Research and Education for Development) and CERFLA (*Centre d’Etudes pour la Recherche et la Formation en Langues Africaines*), two closely linked non-profit organizations operating in Pulaar-speaking regions of the country, which have been working over the last twelve years to sustain popular literacy in the language.

ARED now manages a publishing venture that sells between 30,000 and 50,000 volumes of literature every year, predominantly in Senegalese languages. The books are principally dis-

tributed in Senegal, and their continuing publication is 75 percent funded by the proceeds of book sales themselves. ARED is also increasingly active in training (CERFLA was founded to develop the organization’s training vocation) and in local knowledge cultivation. How has it succeeded and what are the lessons of this experience in “adding sinew to local knowledge?”

The cultural context

The Pulaar culture constitutes the largest minority community in Senegal. Nearly a third of the country’s 9 million inhabitants speak Pulaar, second only to those conversant in the majority African language of the country, Wolof. Across West Africa, from Senegal to northern Cameroon, speakers of Pulaar and related Fulani languages

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number over 25 million, nowhere in the national majority but predominant in a number of subnational regions. The Fulani are an ancient herding and, therefore, largely nomadic people, perhaps of Egyptian origins in prehistoric times, who spread across the savanna regions of central and western Africa and became sedentarized in certain areas through religious conversion and political conquest. They have also emigrated to a number of other countries of Africa and many cities of Europe, the Middle East and South Asia.

Starting in the late 1950s, this experience of strong cultural tradition and minority status gave birth to a cultural revitalization. In 1958 a Senegalese Pulaar speaker who had been living in Cairo for twenty years published a novel in the Pulaar language—*Ndikkiri Joom Moolo*, or “Ndikkiri, the First Born, a Guitarist”—written as an exercise in remembering his homeland. It was the story—at turns nostalgic, irreverent and hilarious—of a Pulaar anti-hero who abandoned hearth and home to take up a succession of careers as performing artist, religious cleric and finally charismatic leader, recurrently pursued by political authorities but triumphing and restored to his culture and family in the end. The author chose to write in a Latinized transcription of the language rather than the existing “ajami” or Arabic-based transcription, already in restricted use for many years among the religious elite.

Though rife with typographical errors that the Egyptian proofreaders obviously could not catch, the book gradually acquired a cult readership throughout the Pulaar diaspora. One early reader, who later became an editor of Pulaar-language materials, recounts the effect the book had on him. He found himself devouring the novel outside his residence at three in the morning so that his roommates could sleep.

I would sit on the sidewalk reading from Ndikkiri. With each page, I could barely keep from laughing out loud as I sat alone in the street. ... The next day, I would entertain my friends with stories from Ndikkiri while we drank tea together. In the end, all of my friends who were literate in Pulaar could hardly wait [to read] the book...

The birth of a movement

This sort of enthusiasm helped give birth to a movement of Pulaar literacy and cultural renewal among those living in the Near East. From there, the initiative spread to France

and in 1982 came home to Senegal in the form of the *Association pour la Renaissance du Poular* (ARP), an organization uniting overseas Pulaar-speakers with others living in urban areas of Senegal who wished their children to be more familiar with their own culture.

In the years following, ARP—spurred in part by the spread of African language literacy programs and in part by the threat of the adoption of Wolof as official lingua franca for the country—turned its energies to promoting local literacy classes in Pulaar in Senegal itself. Hundreds such classes were created over the next five years—classes sponsored by government agencies or official development projects as well as a mass of others initiated by local communities themselves. Standards were typically low, however; writing systems used were extremely various; and follow-up literature was very scarce. But the enthusiasm was real and the initiative was passionately homegrown.

In an effort to remedy the perceived weaknesses of the campaign, a group of Pulaar authors created in 1989 a *Groupe d'Initiative pour la Promotion des Livres en Langue Nationale* (“Group for Initiatives to Promote Books in National Languages” or GIPLLN) to draw together existing texts and facilitate their distribution to literacy classes. The instinct was good, but the initiative proved more ambitious than a team of authors could manage by themselves. Operations were consequently transferred the following year to a new nonprofit association registered in the United States, ARED. GIPLLN members constituted much of the Board, but technically-skilled Senegalese and an American researcher married to a Pulaar speaker were brought in as the association’s executive personnel. ARED set about reproducing the stock of Pulaar-language texts available and developing others, essentially as a service to the new literacy centers.

Unexpected success

The undertaking succeeded to a much greater extent than its promoters had anticipated. The combination of literacy courses, an increasingly self-aware diaspora community, and the growth of NGOs concerned with developing better avenues of dissemination and contact with Pulaar-speaking populations offered a growing, if initially modest, “market” for such publications. The numbers of volumes sold annually expanded from 6,000 in 1988 to 41,000 in 2000, and titles published from a handful to over 150. Fully 95 percent of

sales were to clients in Senegal. Prices were set to cover production costs and afford resellers a potential 25 percent margin of profit.

“Resellers” in fact included none of the major bookstores in the country, which did not—and still do not—deal in African language literature. ARED counts instead on small merchants and entrepreneurs who see the interest of their texts for local readers and buy a few dozen to resell. Their favorite story in this regard concerns a young man who walked from Kayes (in neighboring Mali) to Dakar, the capital of Senegal, behind a large herd of cattle. He sold his livestock on the urban market and showed up at ARED offices with a good part of his take: over 1,000,000 West African francs (about \$1,500). The money was already earmarked to buy Pulaar-language publications for resale in the Kayes region, volumes ordered ahead of time by local merchants there. The young man carried away a minor library to the train station, confident of a good profit on his return home.

A rich palette of publications

Through the end of calendar year 2000, ARED and its predecessor, GILLPIN, had disseminated 350,000 copies of their publications, representing 168 different titles, 85 of them written in Pulaar or translated into it, and the rest in other Senegalese languages, including French. This mass of literature can be broken down in at least two informative ways—by topic area and by source. Materials cover the following basic topic areas:

- *literacy and numeracy manuals* (seven titles published in calendar year 2000, two of them new)
- *novels, stories and other creative literature* (one new title last year)
- *information on development and civil society* (six titles published in 2000, two of them new)
- *treatises on indigenous knowledge and traditional or religious practices* (three titles, two new)
- *instructional texts for management capacity building* (one new publication).

Four different sources have been used for the written material. The first is texts—mostly creative or religious—authored by the founding members of GILLPIN and ARED themselves. Second come materials developed and written by ARED staff, principally its series of basic literacy training

manuals. The third category comprises new books developed by staff, or existing publications translated into a Senegalese language by them, at the request of some outside donor. Publications of this nature include everything from agricultural extension manuals to a Pulaar version of *L’Aventure Ambiguë*, the renowned work of Senegalese novelist Cheikh Amadou Kane, translated under his personal direction. Interestingly, in both cases cited, ARED staff and resellers have testimonies from readers among the civil servant and University student population who admit they never fully understood the material before seeing the Pulaar version.

Last but not least, except numerically, come unsolicited manuscripts submitted by free-lance authors. Such submissions have until recently been quite rare, in part because ARED had not worked out clear contracting and remuneration norms for free-lance authors. These problems have now been resolved, however: published authors receive 10 percent of proceeds from sales of their books in two installments. Moreover, the organization has decided in its most recent general assembly to systematically encourage free-lance submissions in order to foster broader local authorship of publications; and the total number of such works having appeared in print has now risen to six.

Fiscal policies

ARED does not distribute its books free of charge, but rather tries to set prices at a level that covers cost of production plus a commission for the potential resellers while remaining relatively affordable in Senegalese terms. Most titles currently cost the equivalent of \$1.50. Some are subsidized by outside donors, like NGOs interested in using literacy manuals or commissioning documents on development themes, or bilateral agencies wishing to produce extension material for projects they fund. Others are underwritten by ARED’s own “investment funds,” or the savings they have realized from their diverse training and publication endeavors over the years. *In toto*, ARED now covers 75 percent of the cost of its publishing through book sales and another 25 percent through subsidized support and its own investment funds, making it the nearest thing to a self-funding source of African language publications in francophone West Africa.

During the latter years of the last decade, the organization’s revenues were greatly strengthened by two clients. The first was foreign-aid supported government lit-

eracy programs that, under Senegal's *faire faire* or decentralized service provision strategy, funded a variety of NGOs to carry out their own local literacy efforts and authorized them to purchase manuals and texts from publishing ventures like ARED that had developed certifiably effective materials. On the strength of these orders, for example, the number of basic literacy books in Pulaar sold surged from just under 9,000 in 1995 to over 40,000. The second source was major support from Lutheran World Relief (LWR) throughout the early and middle years of the decade, both for training local associations and for the development and publication of a variety of written materials. Forty-seven of the latter were funded entirely or in part by LWR. Its support was sharply curtailed starting in 1998, however, due to problems that the organization was experiencing in its own fund raising. ARED was forced to downsize its staff, consolidate its operations, and concentrate efforts on areas of demand likely to produce new business. The effort has apparently been a success. In calendar year 2000, ARED produced 12 new titles and CERFLA carried out 26 new training sessions, while the total numbers of books sold rebounded from a low of 23,000 in the year following reduction in its major underwriting to 41,000.

Lessons learned

What are the lessons of the ARED experience? For one, the story of ARED makes it clear that—at least under the conditions in Senegal that the association has faced over the last two decades—it is possible to develop a nonprofit business and publishing firm devoted to African language literacy and to the dissemination of indigenous knowledge. There are workable formulas that rely essentially on local sales and service receipts (though partly provided through the NGO and aid funding network), without major underwriting from donor agencies. ARED has survived this transition and managed

to continue growing. Several non-financial factors have played a critical role, however, in the association's success:

- ARED and CERFLA are as much “movement” as nonprofit business. The contributions of a certain number of political ringleaders from within the Pulaarophone community, both in the diaspora and locally in Senegal, have been critical to their maturation and growth.
- An ability to read the signs of the times and discern developmental “niches” for African-language publications and literacy development has also been essential. Much in the current spirit of decentralization, local empowerment and cultural renewal lends itself to making the formula work, but a bit of entrepreneurial spirit and acumen is required to capitalize on it.
- Good institutional backup for accounting and management have also proved critical. ARED benefits here from a system and a track record for resource management and from its status as a US-, as well as Senegal-, registered association.
- Ironically, perhaps, aspects of the information revolution have simplified and supported the task of publishing in African languages. Computers can handle the specialized fonts for language-specific sounds that posed big obstacles in the typewriter age, desk-top publishing makes local document design and production a relative snap, and e-mail tightens networks among far-flung allies.

Recognizing a disappearing resource

To these factors should be added both the minority status and the particular resilience of the Pulaar community, which has lent to the endeavor a certain aura of “sacred cause.” Nothing frames the value of indigenous knowledge and the will to perpetuate so well, it would seem, as widespread awareness that it is in danger of disappearing.

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