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Contextualizing the vernacular: Signposts from African languages, writing, and literature

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This chapter considers the evolving functions and status of ideas about the vernacular as an expression of what Sheldon Pollock (2000: 591–2) famously called an attachment to “the smaller place” rather than “the larger world.” And it does so from the perspective of African interactions with the idea of the vernacular. Speaking about Europe and the Indian subcontinent, Pollock (1998a: 41) further described the accompanying project of vernacularization as “a process of change by which the universalistic orders, formations, and practices of the preceding millennium were supplemented and gradually replaced by localized forms.” Pollock (1998a: 45) associates this process with a deliberate turning towards languages that do not travel as the predominant languages of the ensuing political unit that he calls the vernacular polity. In reflecting on what the vernacular is and signifies in the context of African societies in this chapter, special attention will be given to the ways in which African conceptions of vernacular literacy and developments in literary writing from the mid-twentieth to the early twenty-first century do or do not appear to instantiate a process of vernacularization. The chapter will also weigh the degree to which such attachments to the smaller place are manifested in a foregrounding of vernacular languages and vernacular writing, and the degree to which commitments to vernacular languages factor into the international circulation of African literature and textual forms more broadly.

My principal argument is that if we think of vernacularization as the course of renouncing the larger place for the smaller place as Pollock (2000: 592) puts it, then this is indeed a process that we see unfolding in political terms in several sites on the African continent in the early twenty-first century. And yet, the ramifications of vernacularization for initiatives intended to bolster vernacular literacy and thus vernacular literature have been far from predictable. In general,

support for smaller polities has not often been accompanied by a commitment to policies and practices advancing the interests of languages that distinguish the smaller political unit from larger political units. At the same time and since the mid-twentieth century, writing in the vernacular has continued to grow for several African languages.¹ However, much of this literature does not enter into the mainstream of African literature, let alone the mainstream of world literature, or if it does, it does not do so in vernacular languages.² Still, the notion of the vernacular remains eminently useful even for those African authors whose works circulate internationally and usually in non-native languages, under the banner of world literature. This is because affiliations with the vernacular often serve to authenticate distinctive cultural provenance. Nonetheless, vernacular languages seldom function as the principal medium through which the most prominent literary texts circulate in written form even within a singular African country, let alone within the African continent as a whole, and beyond the African continent. But a strong or tenuous connection with vernacular languages almost always strengthens the cultural claims made for a work that circulates internationally. Support for these observations will be provided in what follows in the rest of the chapter.

Defining the vernacular

To start with, one might ask, what exactly is the vernacular? In recognition of the many competing definitions of the vernacular, Shaden Tageldin says the vernacular is “terminological quicksand” (2018: 115). In a similar vein, S. Shankar had earlier remarked that the “*vernacular* has multiple meanings”

¹ Much of this writing occurs in languages that are official languages like Kiswahili or Amharic, or in languages that are spoken by a significant majority in particular countries, such as Hausa and Yoruba in Nigeria, or Zulu in South Africa, or Setswana in Botswana.

² Many of these African-language texts are published by relatively small presses within individual countries that make the published texts available mainly for students in primary and secondary schools as well as universities. For reasons that will be discussed in further detail later in the chapter, these texts rarely circulate beyond an individual country and beyond literate native speakers of the language of the text within that country. This does not necessarily mean that these texts are inward looking. For example, Mwangi (2017) says: “African-language texts published by small firms and for local audiences grapple with the issues of cosmopolitanism and hospitality to the foreign, especially borrowing metaphors from translation practices” (6). Similarly, Karin Barber (1997) remarks that the authors of three Yoruba language novels written during the colonial period were not “narrowly parochial” and addressed “readers as *representatives* of a much larger constituency: a community of all ‘eniyan dudu’ (Africans/black people), present and future—a ‘we’ that reaches beyond the horizon” (115; emphasis in original).

(2012: 133). Citing the dictionary, Tageldin further proposes that we might define the vernacular as “native or indigenous, non-literary, nonstandard, spoken or oral, colloquial, everyday, nonspecialized” (2018: 114).

Among African creative writers, the term vernacular has often been understood as a reference to another language-related concept that attracts special reverence, namely the concept of the mother tongue. The Senegalese writer, Cheikh Aliou Ndao, described the mother tongue as “the language that nurses you’ [*làmmiñ wi nga nàmp*]” (Warner 2019: 214). The Tanzanian author, Shaaban bin Robert, likewise mobilizes mammary metaphors when he describes the mother tongue “as his mother’s breast, a ‘titi la mama’” (Mwangi 2017: 48). There are, however, other ways of understanding what the vernacular might be in an African context. For example, the sociolinguist, Chege Githiora characterizes Sheng, a variety of Kenyan Swahili, as a Kenyan vernacular, as a way of alluding to the ease with which mostly younger Kenyans would default to speaking in Sheng, even when it was not a mother tongue. From this perspective, Githiora argues that “[a] significant population of Kenya speaks Sheng as their ‘vernacular,’ that is as a variety of language used for spontaneous, natural expression by members of a speech community” (2018: 19). In describing Sheng as a Kenyan vernacular here, Githiora is not necessarily implying that the language functions as an avatar of irreducible nativeness. To the contrary, he has also underscored Sheng’s cosmopolitan potential, pointing out that it is often deployed as a “pan-ethnic variety of Swahili attuned to global black culture” (172).

My own earlier definitions of the vernacular in discussions of African literature bring us back to the question of the mother tongue and stem from an awareness of the continuing preoccupation with mother tongues among African creative writers who advocate for writing in African languages. It is for this reason that I invoked the term vernacular to “describe language in its specific function as a mother tongue” (Adejunmobi 2004: 2). Given the significant levels of multilingualism and polyglotism registered in many African communities, I found it useful in thinking about literature and language in an African setting to distinguish between the varied functions of a language, in its capacity as *lingua franca* or language of wider communication for example, in contrast to deployment as mother tongue. This is a distinction that is critical for understanding the actual languages in which texts circulate when they travel beyond a community of native speakers of a given language. As noted further in this chapter, it is not always clear whether advocacy for writing in a language described as the vernacular among African writers is actually advocacy on

behalf of a lingua franca or whether what is at stake is the possibility of writing in a mother tongue that is not also a lingua franca.

Given the tendency to conflate the mother tongue and the lingua franca in discussions about the vernacular, it is worth pointing out that Pollock's own reference to the rejection of universalistic orders for more localized forms does not necessarily imply adoption of a mother tongue by vernacular polities. What is more likely is that premodern (and indeed contemporary) vernacular polities often reverted to a local language that did not have as wide a reach as the language of universalistic orders, but which had the highest probability of sustaining an independent sphere of communication and creativity among all the local languages spoken within the polity. In that vein, I would further posit that invocations of the vernacular are above all claims to localness that principally matter for distinguishing between the local and the non-local.³ What is presented as the vernacular may or may not have a long history in a particular region, as long as it serves to distinguish between the local and the non-local in a given context. This is a point that I will return to later when I discuss the example of Afrobeats.

There are other African authors who have also endorsed the principle of writing in an African language, or using an African originated script. The Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah's plea for writing in Egyptian hieroglyphics is one example (Mwangi 2017: 8). This too can be understood as a plea for a vernacular, distinguishing between an expansive sense of the local encompassing the entire African continent, and a non-local corresponding to the non-African, but does not necessarily equate to writing in either a first language or a mother tongue for any Africans alive today. In contrast, the call by the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o for writing in African languages has often been misunderstood as a call for writing in all African languages when it was in fact a call for writing specifically in mother tongues envisioned as the true vernaculars for African writers. As made clear in Adejunmobi (2004: 21), African advocates for writing in African languages have not been consistent in distinguishing between writing in an African language that had become a lingua franca like Kiswahili and writing in an African language that had not become a lingua franca. Thus, Tanzania was sometimes presented as an example of a country that under its first president had encouraged citizens to write in their mother tongues. But what Julius Nyerere, Tanzania's first president in fact did was make Kiswahili—a language that was

³ As noted by Adejunmobi, there is a need to move away "from the tendency to see the local and the foreign as fixed categories, exemplified inter alia, in choices to be made between using indigenous and non-native languages. On the contrary, these are classifications whose scope of application is in constant flux and always subject to revision" (2004: 134).

for the majority at that time, a second or third language—the official language of the country and the language of education.⁴ When some African writers like Wole Soyinka called for writing in African languages, what they had in mind was the elevation of a single African language like Kiswahili as the sole and unifying language of writing for all Africans.⁵ For many others, however, Ngũgĩ included, writing in an African language meant writing in one's mother tongue.

Against this backdrop, we can see that Ngũgĩ's position on writing in African languages actually differs from that of the Tanzanian author Shaaban, who described Kiswahili, the language in which he wrote, as his mother tongue, though as Mwangi (2017: 48) has indicated, Shaaban's first language was Yao, not Kiswahili.⁶ Shaaban's willingness to identify with a language that was not his first language is certainly in keeping with historical trends in Africa before the twentieth century. As Carola Lentz observes with respect to identities on the African continent in the past: "Communities could be based on neighbourhood, kinship and common loyalties to a king, but this did not absolutely have to include notions of a common origin, a common language or a common culture" (2000: 411). Friederike Lüpke echoes Lentz in noting that traditionally "African societies were and are not organized along ethnic and linguistic boundaries" (2021: 2). Notwithstanding this history, and as noted by Mwangi (2017: 48), both Ngũgĩ and Shaaban mobilized their divergent understandings of the concept of the mother tongue as a way of defining their respective homelands as a space preferably reserved for the speakers of the designated mother tongue, and not for the non-African residents who did not speak either Gikuyu (in Kenya) or Kiswahili (in Tanzania).

Renouncing the larger place, embracing the vernacular?

In postcolonial Africa, renouncing the larger unit for the smaller space has more often been accompanied by an association with a regionally distinctive language than with a commitment to promoting a mother tongue as the

⁴ In electing to make Kiswahili, which was already an emergent lingua franca, the national language, Nyerere, whose own mother tongue was not Kiswahili, exemplified the practice mentioned on the preceding page of choosing a local language that did not travel as widely as the language of universalistic orders, but which had the highest probability of sustaining an independent sphere of communication and creativity among all the local languages spoken within the polity.

⁵ See Soyinka (1988) for more on this.

⁶ At that point, Kiswahili was a lingua franca in Tanzania, but rarely a mother tongue.

language of state or language of education, and especially higher education. For countries in North Africa that use Arabic, which is not the language of a recent colonizing power as the language of state and education, this is an idiom that is shared with several other countries in Africa and in the Middle East. Arabic is of course a distinctive language, but one of a vast pan-Arab region rather than of an individual country. This selection is also a choice that overlooks numerous first languages spoken in some of these North African countries such as the Berber languages and the non-standardized varieties of spoken Arabic. And for countries like Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Tanzania that do use a language that is distinctive to the nation as the language of state, the language selected is not the mother tongue of substantial segments of the population in each country. The selected languages also have a regional presence beyond the individual country. In these instances, then, the turn towards a distinctive language for the smaller space of a would-be nation-state is not associated with investing in a first language or a mother tongue, though the elevation of one or more languages above other languages might be justified by describing the selected languages as vernaculars. Certainly, the claim could be made that the indigenous language selected as a country's distinctive language offers a more authentic representation of the country, and, in that sense, is entitled to be considered a vernacular in a way that imperial languages like English, French, or Italian could never be. Such claims might be viewed as all the more justified given the selected language's longer history in the country and region, as well as the fact that the selected language or languages were already spoken by a more substantial number of citizens than might be the case for the languages of recent colonizing nations. Maneuvers of this kind on the part of some African governments since at least the mid-twentieth century point to a divergence between governments and many creative writers when it comes to defining what the vernacular is and what its role should be. In some instances, these divergent interpretations of the vernacular have opened up a gap leading to tensions between the multilingual nation-state's adoption of a distinctive language as an official language intended to unify the country, and the individual writer's commitment to producing literature in their own mother tongue.⁷

⁷ For examples of the tensions between the language of the state and the languages of regions within a multilingual nation-state, see Marzagora and Kebede's discussion of the interactions between writing in Amharic and writing in Oromo in Ethiopia.

The notion of a firm equivalence between language and nation or ethnos as described by Pascale Casanova (2004: 78) would appear to be fairly recent on the African continent. Still, it is true that in the current era, ethnic groups across Africa now like to distinguish themselves by language even when the existence of the group as a singular cultural and political unit is quite recent (Lüpke 2020; Adejunmobi 2004). In such cases too, the now acknowledged language of the ethnic group will be described as their vernacular language. Strangely enough, though, several of the politically oriented ethnic nationalisms in colonial and postcolonial Africa have not often come into existence in conjunction with a commitment to using the ethnic group's claimed distinctive language in official statements and in writing.⁸ For example, for the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria during the late colonial period and early post-independence years, awareness of belonging to a distinct group was connected with the notion of a distinctive language; nonetheless, after the introduction of Roman script, what van den Bersselaar (2000) calls a vernacular readership coalesced around texts written in English rather than in Igbo. In fact, van den Bersselaar (2000) goes so far as to describe the popular literature that emerged in English in the Igbo-speaking areas of Nigeria in the mid-twentieth century, popularly known as Onitsha Market Literature, as the “vernacular literature” of the Igbo despite the fact that it was written in English.

Developments in the twenty-first century reveal the continued salience of the notion of the vernacular for African communities as well as its changing functions. The languages identified by diverse African ethnic groups as their vernaculars can no longer be described as languages that do not travel in the way in which Pollock envisioned the vernacular. Given the pace of global migration, speakers of these languages are now distributed around the world. However, and because these languages rarely serve as languages of wider communication uniting speakers of different mother tongues, they do not often serve as vectors for what Pollock calls “universalistic orders.” Instead, they may be associated with nationalist movements that are transnational and regional in their membership.

⁸ I refer here to claimed languages since the languages that some ethnic groups would later claim to be their distinctive language was a language that earlier generations did not recognize as their language. As van den Bersselaar (1997) makes clear with respect to the language of the Igbo ethnic group, members of the ethnic group now described as Igbo did not see themselves as speaking the same language until the second half of the twentieth century, and after successive interventions by missionaries to persuade the Igbos that they were speakers of a single shared language. For other instances in Africa where identification with the standardized language was slow to come, see Adejunmobi (2004: 56–61).

Indeed, a new regionalism that is often transnational in its membership is at play around Africa in the early twenty-first century. There are newer nationalist movements emerging in different African countries pursuing political autonomy on behalf of units smaller than the larger world of the existing states. But these movements, too, do not seem particularly committed to advancing the ideal of literacy in a distinctive language, let alone a mother tongue.

Consider, for example, the many separatist movements that have emerged across Nigeria since 2000. Some of the best known include MASSOB (Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra) founded in 2000, and IPOB (Indigenous Peoples of Biafra) established in 2012. Both movements are following in the footsteps of the secessionist movement that attempted to break away from Nigeria in the late 1960s in the leadup to the Nigerian civil war. As currently imagined, the territory of a future Biafra would encompass much of southeastern Nigeria as well as substantial parts of what is called the “South South” geopolitical zone, which is home to well over fifty ethnic groups speaking different languages.⁹ While the diverse separatist movements in Nigeria have been associated with ethnic nationalisms (Duruji 2012), and those in southeastern Nigeria are seen as mainly expressions of Igbo ethnic nationalism, this is not an ethnic nationalism that focuses on promoting a distinctive language as a future language of state and education. For instance, and on the website of IPOB’s radio station, Radio Biafra,¹⁰ virtually all materials are in English. Even on the broadcasts on the radio station, most of the spoken language is in English occasionally interspersed with phrases in Igbo. It is not just that the language used by these movements is not their self-identified mother tongue; even more importantly, it is not a language that distinguishes the nation that is being willed into existence from other nations in Africa.

The distance between desires for the smaller place and commitment to writing in a distinctive language is even greater for the separatist movements that are now active in Cameroon. In 2016, a full-scale protest movement culminating in calls for secession erupted in the region of the Republic of Cameroon formerly known as the British Southern Cameroons and often described today simply as anglophone Cameroon. Supporters of this protest and increasingly militant movement are calling for the creation of a separate country, to be named

⁹ Nigeria is currently divided into six geopolitical zones. The Southeast and what is called the South South are two of the six geopolitical zones of the country.

¹⁰ For more on Radio Biafra, see: <https://radiobiafra.co/>.

Ambazonia. While the tensions between anglophone Cameroonians and the Cameroonian government cannot be reduced to matters of language alone, language and the expectation that all interactions with government officials should be in French has been a major flashpoint.¹¹ Indeed, a demand for Cameroonian authorities to stop appointing Francophone judges who spoke no English to the anglophone areas of Cameroon was the catalyst for the protests that broke out in 2016. This was soon followed by the resurgence of militant groups demanding independence, a development that has led the Cameroonian government to declare a state of emergency in the anglophone Cameroon. The forces calling for the independence of a country to be named Ambazonia are undoubtedly motivated by nationalist impulses. Still, it is interesting to note that what the multiethnic and multilingual residents of the proposed country have in common is a history of British colonial rule, opposition to the French dominated Republic of Cameroon, and a desire to live in a country where the language of bureaucracy and state would be English rather than French. Since the events unfolding in the anglophone Cameroon involve renouncing the larger space for a smaller space, they can indeed be called vernacularization as Pollock defines it. But this is not a process undertaken with an intent to advance the interests of a mother tongue. In addition, the language of the separatist movement itself, English, is not one that distinguishes this smaller place from other countries on the African continent, though it does distinguish Ambazonia from French-speaking Cameroon.¹²

In sum and in twenty-first century Africa, if the examples of Biafra and Ambazonia are anything to go by, there would seem to be fewer opportunities for the kind of vernacularization accompanied by the privileging of distinctive languages that unfolded in early modern India and Europe to occur. What we have here is vernacularization as a political process without a commitment to the vernacular either as distinctive language or mother tongue. In matters pertaining

¹¹ This region in Cameroon had previously been a German colony until World War I, becoming a British colony in 1914. Denied the opportunity of becoming an independent nation, residents voted to join the French Cameroons in 1960. The country was initially administered as a federal republic allowing for the use of English in the former British territory. However, and as successive governments have become more autocratic in Cameroon, the rights of residents in this part of the country to use a language other than French in public settings has become increasingly contested.

¹² For more on the language and culture divide in the anglophone Cameroons, see volume 14, number 2 (2020) of the *Journal of the African Literature Association*, titled "Fragmented Nation or the Anglophone-Cameroon Problem in Cameroon," and edited by Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abenyi and Gilbert Doho. Also see: "History Explains Why Cameroon is at War with Itself over Language and Culture," <https://theconversation.com/history-explains-why-cameroon-is-at-war-with-itself-over-language-and-culture-85401>.

to language, the primary challenge facing twenty-first-century nationalist movements in Africa is not so much the fact that the communities purportedly represented by the movements are multilingual though this undoubtedly represents a challenge. What the movements for regional autonomy and indeed independence in both southeastern Nigeria and in anglophone Cameroon have in common is the fact that both emerged in an age where political leaders can no longer assume that claiming any one language as a country's "vernacular" and imposing that language as the country's distinctive language on a multilingual population will not be met with sustained opposition.¹³ Thus, we have side by side in contemporary Africa political movements dedicated to advancing the interests of smaller spaces, often coupled with an avoidance of explicit interventions designed to elevate one distinctive language above other languages or other vernaculars spoken within those spaces.

Vernacular literacies, scripts and languages

Despite the fact that processes of vernacularization on the African continent have not been supported by increased investment in vernacular literacy since the end of the twentieth century, writing in vernacular languages continues to grow and spread in different regional contexts. Writing has a longer history than is often acknowledged in Africa. There are many indigenous scripts on the continent, some of which are quite old (Abdelhay, Asfaha, and Juffermans 2014: 4–5). Among the older scripts that Abdelhay, Asfaha, and Juffermans identify, one might mention scripts like Ge'ez in Ethiopia, and Tifinagh in Morocco that are still in use. These are vernacular literacies in the sense proposed by Barbara Trudell and Anthony Klass, who write that, "Vernacular literacy is not simply literacy in the community's own language; it is distinctive in its lack of official recognition, institutional use, and political prestige" (2010: 124).

Ajami, or the use of Arabic script to write African languages, is one of the most widely distributed forms of vernacular writing in Africa today. Ajami script is used across much of West Africa in communities with long-established Muslim traditions. Texts written in Ajami can be found all the way from Senegal on the western end of West Africa to northern Cameroon as well as in East

¹³ The post-Apartheid governments in South Africa resolved this conundrum by declaring eleven of the country's more than thirty languages as official languages of the country.

Africa. Adoption of Ajami has been documented for languages like Wolof, Pulaar, Hausa, and Yoruba among others. In Senegal, where a vibrant practice of writing Wolof using Ajami continues till the present time, it is known as Wolofal. Wolof in Ajami script dates back to at least the seventeenth century (Lüpke and Bao-Diop 2014: 101). As a form of writing, Ajami has traveled widely, even if the languages or varieties of the languages written in Ajami script are not always as widely spoken as the script itself is used. Notwithstanding the widespread use of Ajami, texts written in Ajami are not often translated and seldom enter into the international flow of cultural goods and textual forms emanating from the African continent. This is at least in part because the practice of Ajami often involves writing in a non-standardized script.

If we describe the vernacular as highly localized forms of expression, then non-standard forms of writing are some of the most vernacular forms of writing. Tageldin's association of the vernacular with the "native or indigenous, non-literary, nonstandard" comes to mind here (2018: 114). These non-standardized scripts have spread in the absence of institutionally sanctioned forms of writing and because individuals across the continent want to be able to express themselves in writing and in images even where local institutions do not have the means or willingness to promote standardized forms of writing. Some languages like Wolof and Hausa have acquired a standardized form in Roman script (Ngom 2010: 10), but as McLaughlin (forthcoming) points out for Wolof, the standardized Roman script is less frequently used than the non-standardized Ajami script. While not displacing languages such as English and French in Roman script from their entrenched positions, writing in indigenous languages appears to be gaining in popularity in at least some African contexts. However, and as Lüpke observes, "the standard orthographies devised for West African languages by missionaries and linguists are barely used. Yet other regimes of writing are thriving in the area: some of them have exploded with the advent of social media and mobile phones, and some of them have long predated colonial times" (2018: 129). Along the same lines, Warner (2019: 151, 213) reports that in Senegal, Wolof in Romanized script is now ubiquitous, though more frequently written in nonstandard orthographies than in the officially approved orthography.

If during the colonial period missionaries could develop orthographies for African languages and then, working in tandem with the colonial authorities impose those orthographies through the school system, the situation is more complicated today. With the exception of the handful of African countries where a distinctive language has been selected as official language, most African

governments exhibit considerable ambivalence when it comes to enforcing an orthography for any one of the many vernaculars spoken in the country. On the one hand, and as reported by Ohiri-Aniche (2007), Olúmúyiwá (2013), and Bourlet (2019), it is not uncommon for government-backed committees to be established to update or finalize the orthography for particular vernacular languages. On the other hand, the authorities in what are typically multilingual states often do not have much incentive or the wherewithal to enforce adoption of an orthography for the languages in use within the country. As suggested by Lüpke (2018) in her observations about writing African vernacular languages, a growing sense of comfort with non-standardized scripts appears to be fueling more and more writing in African languages, especially on social media. However, the implications of these trends for the circulation of literary texts beyond the groups of people who speak a particular vernacular and can read the language in a particular kind of script remain to be seen. To the extent, then, that we can speak of vernacularization with respect to writing happening today on the African continent, we are referring to a process that almost always entails developments occurring outside the scope of initiatives backed by the full force of the state. Under the circumstances and given the fact that standardized forms of writing vernacular languages appear to be less well established in many parts of Africa, we would not be far off the mark in describing much of the continent as a zone where multiple and intersecting forms of vernacularity thrive. Yet only infrequently do these forms of vernacularity stand in contrast to a standard form of a given language whose dominance has been settled.

Even as non-standardized forms of writing African languages appear to be proliferating, so also do disagreements over orthography, standardization, and even the choice of script for individual languages. Recent examples include the campaign to privilege Roman script over Arabic script among marginalized ethnic groups in Sudan (Abdel Rahim Mugaddam and Ashraf Abdelhay 2014) as well as in Mauritania (Bourlet 2019), and disagreements over standardization and orthography for the Berber languages (Amazigh) in Morocco (Abderrahman El Aissati 2014). One might also mention here the debates over an appropriate orthography for Wolof in the early years after independence in Senegal (Warner 2019: 123–8, 144–7). This was a debate that pitted creative writer against creative writer, Birago Diop against Ousmane Sembene, and Leopold Senghor, the writer and president, against Ousmane Sembene, the writer. Even for languages that supposedly have an official orthography, arguments continue over the appropriateness of the orthography, at a time when non-standardized forms

of writing the languages in question are becoming more widespread especially among the youth. As an example, in August of 2020 the British Museum in London hosted a two-day symposium on how to write Yoruba, one of the African languages with the largest number of speakers, and whether to reject non-standard forms of writing Yoruba. The symposium was marked by fierce and lively disagreement among scholars, creative writers, and editors, with some panelists insisting that only the standardized forms of writing Yoruba were acceptable, while others pleaded for a more lenient approach towards non-standardized forms of writing. And, as reported by Olúmúyiwá (2013), far from being a recent phenomenon, such disputations over how best to write Yoruba go back at least a hundred years or more.

All of this has implications for the circulation of texts written in non-standardized scripts beyond the immediate locality where the script is in use in conjunction with a specific language. All things being equal, established publishers are less likely to invest in publishing a work written in a language for which there is not yet an agreed-upon orthography or where non-standardized scripts have become entrenched. In other words, the circulation of a text written in a non-standardized script beyond the community of those who use that script and are fluent in the variety of the language in question will likely be fairly restricted. The critic and creative writer Mukoma wa Ngugi (2018: 1) could lament the fact that Chinua Achebe's celebrated *Things Fall Apart* had not been translated into and published in Achebe's mother tongue, Igbo, without knowing that Achebe's own ventures in writing in Igbo had attracted criticism from other Igbo scholars for failing to use what was considered the standard but also often contested orthography for the language (Ohiri-Aniche 2007: 425). Lüpke and Bao-Diop (2014: 111) maintain that Ajami remains popular in a country like Senegal despite its lack of standardization. However, the texts written in a specific vernacular that can and do travel beyond the communities of those who are fluent in the vernacular in question are those that are produced in standardized script since standardization allows for translation and the creation of zones of commensurability between texts in different languages and different scripts.¹⁴ I would not necessarily go so far as to say that by virtue of being infrequently translated, these non-standardized vernacular forms of writing

¹⁴ This would more likely be the case for texts written in standardized forms of languages like Yoruba, or Isizulu, though as I point out subsequently in this chapter, even when texts are written in standardized forms of African languages, they are not translated into other languages as frequently as one might expect.

“resist translation” in the way that Shankar (2012: 138) does, since that suggests some degree of agency. But I would suggest that these non-standardized scripts tend to be highly opaque to outsiders of a community who are not already fluent in the vernacular and familiar with the specific script used.

African vernacular literatures and the world’s literatures

World literature is often understood as a classification that seeks to acknowledge and accommodate the literatures of the world in their diversity. Some scholars, like S. Shankar, come to the discussion about world literature from a perspective that privileges acknowledgement of the “literatures of the world” (Shankar 2012: 135) in their variety, whether or not those literatures are read beyond the communities where they were produced. By contrast, and in David Damrosch’s famous formulation, world literature encompasses “all literary works that circulate beyond their country of origin either in translation, or their original language” (2003: 4). In effect, this would amount to a mere subset of what Shankar calls “literatures of the world.” Nonetheless, and within this expansive grouping of works on the move, writing in a vernacular tends to function as a proxy for the different cultural units in the world that could be acknowledged within the compass of the term. Furthermore, and according to Aamir Mufti, world literature operates as a “*plane of equivalence*, a set of categorical grids and networks that seek ... to render legible as literature a vast and heterogeneous range of practices of writing from across the world” (2016: 11). For such a category aiming at equivalencies, translation is essential. The different points of emphasis underscored by Shankar, Damrosch, and Mufti are all relevant to our understanding of the intersections between African literature, African vernaculars, and the category of world literature.

The grouping of literary texts that is commonly referred to as African literature initially emerged from and still largely functions as an expansive domain of vernacularity, or what I have described elsewhere as a “zone of affinity” (Adejunmobi 2004: 68–9), albeit a zone where the constituents do not share the same mother tongues, though they all claim affiliation with the same geographical unit. Since the stakeholders for this grouping of texts and its attendant field of interactions (such as writers and critics) often owe their primary allegiance to this special conjunction of literature with geography

(Africa), rather than a conjunction of literature with particular languages such as Hausa or Shona for example, their ability to sustain this grouping depends to a large extent on a process of continuous translation or communication using a limited number of languages.¹⁵ Historically, the opportunities and facilities for translation in this domain of vernacularity have been rather limited, with the result that the major languages through which this field of interactions has operated have been English or French, though and as I have explained elsewhere (Adejunmobi 2004: 66), there is no reason why one or two African languages cannot also serve the same purpose.

Notwithstanding this history, several African languages do in fact have established traditions of vernacular-language literary writing.¹⁶ Literary vernacularization has happened for several languages and is perhaps even accelerating without the benefit of vernacularization at the level of language policy, with particular consequences for the ways in which the texts do, or do not, circulate. For one thing, these vernacular-language texts are only infrequently translated into the languages of adjacent communities speaking other languages, let alone languages of wider communication that would enable the text to travel further from home within the same country or within a region of the continent. For example, and among Yoruba creative writers who rose to fame starting in the mid-twentieth century, relatively few have had their works translated into any language. None of the Yoruba-language plays and novels by Ọládẹ̀jọ Ọ̀kédìjì have ever been translated into other languages. Among his many works, only two of the plays of Aкінwùmí Íṣòlá have ever been translated into English, namely, the very successful play, *Efúnsetán Aníwúrà, Ìyálóde Ìbàdàn*, and his second historical drama, *Tinúubu, Ìyálóde Ègbá*.¹⁷ Daniel Fagunwa's *Ògbójú Ọdẹ nínú Igbó Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀*, the first lengthy prose work in Yoruba published in novel form in 1938, was not translated into English until 1968. *Itan Igbesi-Aiye Emi "Sẹgìlọla, Èlẹyin'ju Ègẹ", Èlẹgberun Ọkọ L'Aiye*, the first lengthy work of fiction in

¹⁵ Although this may appear counterintuitive, I maintain that many of the advocates for creative writing in African languages owe their primary allegiance to the entity of African literature rather than to a grouping defined by language. Indeed, authors like Ngũgĩ who have called for writing in African languages, appear to be more committed to ensuring the authenticity of "African" literature than to fostering the independent growth of literature in African vernaculars.

¹⁶ For an overview of creative writing in selected African languages, see for example: Albert Gérard (1981), Graham Furniss (1996), Innocentia Mhlambi (2012), Karin Barber (2012), Xavier Garnier (2013), Mélanie Bourlet (2014), Sara Marzagora (2015), and Sara Marzagora and Ayele Kebede (2019).

¹⁷ Please see Pamela Olúbùnmi Smith (2005) for details of the translation.

Yoruba serialized in a Nigerian newspaper from 1929 to 1930, did not receive its first full and annotated translation until 2012.¹⁸

This pattern, and the fact that African vernacular-language texts are rarely translated into other languages, helps to explain the more limited circulation of these works, even within individual countries, and across the African continent as a whole. With the exception of languages such as Kiswahili, Amharic, and, to a lesser extent, languages like Hausa, many African vernacular-language texts are written in languages that are not often spoken as second languages and do not function as languages of wider communication. As a result, and in the absence of translation, such texts are usually available only to mother-tongue readers of the vernacular in question. Within the same country, researchers and critics of African literature who are not mother-tongue speakers of the vernacular in which the text is written will usually be unable to access the text. Furthermore, the small presses that publish these vernacular-language texts often do not have a distribution network that is wide enough to enable distribution of the text beyond the sections of a school system where the text has been assigned.¹⁹ If, against this background, translation happens infrequently for texts written in languages like Yoruba, for which standardized scripts exist, the situation is likely more dire for literary texts rendered in non-standardized scripts. It is patently difficult to achieve Mufti's plane of equivalence and thus a full accounting of the world's literatures (to borrow Shankar's terminology) when dealing with and attempting to translate texts initially written in non-standardized languages and scripts. We are not dealing here, then, with works that are likely to circulate in translation beyond their country of origin in the ways that Damrosch anticipated for world literature.

Unfortunately, however, the challenges for African vernacular literatures do not end with the occasional translation of the African language literary work into other languages. Indeed, when African-authored texts written in a vernacular language are translated into global languages of power, they tend to have unusual circulation trajectories. In the case of Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, publication of the English-language translation preceded publication of the Acholi language source text, *Wer pa Lawino* by three years (Mwangi 2017: 60; Adejunmobi 2004: 76). Following in the same pattern, a translation of *Wer pa Lawino* into

¹⁸ Please see Karin Barber (2012) for details.

¹⁹ For Mélanie Bourlet, just tracking down actual literature books written in Pulaar took on the character of a treasure hunt that spread over multiple cities in multiple countries over several years.

Luganda, one of the major languages of p'Bitek's native country, Uganda, was not published until 2016 (Gikandi 2016: 1196). That the translation into Luganda was based on the English language version of the volume rather than on Acholi language source text points to yet another pattern in the circulation of African vernacular language literary texts: these texts become accessible to non-native speakers of the vernacular used mainly by first being translated into a global language. In short, and no matter the language in which the African authored text was composed or will be read, circulation often occurs through the medium of a global language whenever the text travels beyond a community of native speakers of the vernacular used. Similarly, Cheikh Aliou Ndao's Wolof-language novel, *Buur Tillen*, was first published in a French translation (or adaptation as the author calls it) because the author could not find a publisher to publish the Wolof-language text. The Wolof-language source text would not be published for thirty years after it was initially written (Warner 2019: 153). But even in instances where publication of the translation into a global language did not precede publication of the source text in an African language, the circulation trajectories of the translation could still be constructed in such a way as to subordinate the African language source text to its translation in a global language. Such was the case for Daniel Fagunwa's Yoruba-language novel, *Ògbójú Ọdẹ nínú Igbó Irúnmọlẹ*, translated into English in 1968 by Wole Soyinka, who was already a writer of some acclaim in English at the time though he was still decades away from winning the Nobel Prize in literature. As reported by Abiola Irele, publishers of the translation arranged their presentation of the work in such a way as to foreground the translator who owed his fame to texts written in English, while leaving the vernacular-language author in the background:

In the translation of Fagunwa's novel, *Ogboju Ode*, prepared by Wole Soyinka and published by Nelson, the title page and blurb are designed to relegate Fagunwa into the background as much as possible, and to bring the translator into focus; obviously Nelson are more interested in having Soyinka on their list (with the prospect of good sales that this entails) than in giving the wider world a taste of Fagunwa's creative genius. The cynical attitude of Fagunwa's original publishers with regard to his work is seen at its height in one advertisement of Soyinka's translation I have seen in which they have gone so far as to suppress Fagunwa's name altogether.

(1981: 176)

To be sure, there are African-authored texts in what can be described as vernacular languages that appear to circulate internationally without requiring

translation. As an example, one might mention Afrobeats, a popular music genre identified with both Nigeria and Ghana, that draws inspiration from global hip-hop, has a global reach, and often relies on mixed registers of individual languages and a mixing of languages.²⁰ On the one hand, and for Oloruntoba-Oju, Afrobeats is a “global-local or glocalized phenomenon” (2018: 187). On the other hand, however, this “glocalized phenomenon” as he describes it, is attached to a “conscious Africanity” (198) and signals the rediscovery of an “indigenous heritage” appropriated for “a glocal practice” (182). In Afrobeats, then, we have speech forms that are positioned as vernacular and distinctive of a particular region, coupled with a musical genre that is perceived as global in its style. This clearly domesticated genre confirms a point made by Adejunmobi (2004: 153) with respect to the jazz-influenced music of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, the Nigerian popular singer from the 1970s who pioneered a style of music that he called “Afrobeat.”²¹ In instances where author/producer/artists like Fela in the 1970s and Afrobeats stars in the early twenty-first century creating new and stylistically foreign-inspired orientations for local culture find themselves in competition with cultural outsiders within the borders of their own home territory, they often have an incentive to advertise the local credentials of their art form by invoking their connections to “tradition” or to distinctive languages even when such languages are not mother tongues. In such cases, the artists stand to benefit by aligning their unusual stylistic choices with practices that they can characterize as vernacular or locally inspired.

It is worth noting here that the urban youth languages used in Afrobeats correspond to the kinds of mixed spoken registers that Lüpke (2020: 386) has observed in several African countries, and which Oloruntoba-Oju (2018: 182) describes as a hybrid form of language. In fact, Oloruntoba-Oju (2018: 188) goes so far as to characterize language use in Afrobeats as an instance of “mixilingualism” rather than code-switching.²² For fans of Afrobeats, this admixture of expressions from multiple languages further heightens the genre’s

²⁰ While English is one of many languages used in Afrobeats, the dominant language of Afrobeats is in fact Nigerian Pidgin English. Under the circumstances, it is preferable, like Oloruntoba-Oju, to describe language use in Afrobeats as one that involves hybridity, and multiple types of mixing rather than the term creolization which would require the making of more technical distinctions between Pidgins and Creoles.

²¹ Fela’s style known as Afrobeat in the 1970s is to be distinguished from the hip-hop inflected Afrobeats of the twenty-first century.

²² For Oloruntoba-Oju, code-switching as envisioned by Carol Myers-Scotton in *Duelling Languages* suggests an alternation between two languages, while Oloruntoba-Oju finds that Afrobeats music often involves alternation between as many as six languages in a single song.

pan-ethnic, continent-wide, and cosmopolitan appeal. At the same time, and with lyrics mixing as many as six different languages, these hybrid speech forms are nonetheless highly localized forms of speech, and in that sense true vernaculars. Like Sheng in Kenya, and as argued by Githiora, the mixed register of Afrobeats is seen as a distinctive youth language in parts of West Africa. Thus endowed with various dimensions of vernacularity, these expressive forms can circulate both locally and internationally as quintessentially African creations.

If the trajectory of Afrobeats is anything to go by, international circulation is not incompatible with claims to locality and the vernacular. It is not just that the speakers of African vernacular languages are distributed around the world in ever greater numbers, but also that digital technologies and social media now enable a different type of cultural circulation that is transnational in scope rather than global, and which serves primarily to connect dispersed speakers of particular vernacular languages with each other. Thanks in particular to digital technologies, an alternative circuit of international distribution for African vernacular-language texts has come into existence, one that works to the advantage of shorter texts like those that Stephanie Bosch Santana has called “blog or Facebook fiction,” but also excerpts of texts as well as brief video clips.²³ It is worth noting that the African vernacular-language texts circulating transnationally tend to belong to the world of popular culture rather than that of high literature. The ease with which Afrobeats, as one example, circulates transnationally and globally can also not be dissociated from the fact it is a performative textual form where the beats matter more than the meanings of lyrics, and which, therefore, does not require full intelligibility as would be the case with a lengthy written text. Above all, these are vernacular-based practices that are not “in need of translation” (Shankar 2012: 137–8) because they are often directed at a community comprising mainly native speakers of particular vernaculars.

Unlike performative texts, however, lengthier written texts often require some level of intelligibility in order to be read either locally or abroad by those who are not conversant with the language of the text. The principal way that a lengthy text written in a vernacular that is not a global language will be read beyond a community of speakers of the language used tends to be by being translated

²³ For more on this, see Stephanie Bosch Santana (2018, 2021). Like the Afrobeats singers discussed in this chapter, some authors of what Santana calls “new media literature” write in a mixture of African vernaculars and English that is mainly accessible to members of local communities (Santana 2021: 447).

into a global language of power which then opens the door for translation into other languages. In theory, any text could be translated into a global language; in practice, this option tends to be available for only a fraction of African vernacular language works. Increasingly, the African vernacular-language literary texts that are most likely to be translated into global languages and to circulate around and beyond the African continent are those written by authors who already have works composed and circulating in such global languages. This is the case for both Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Boubacar Boris Diop. Ngũgĩ's *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* was translated into English as *Wizard of the Crow* while Boris Diop's *Doomi Golo* (2003) was translated into English in 2016 as *Doomi Golo: The Hidden Notebooks*. Having previously written in English and French respectively, both authors already had significant visibility on world literature platforms. But it is probably also the case that because their literary works written in global languages of power were already circulating beyond their individual nations and the African continent, their works written in the vernacular could be taken as commensurate types of texts that could easily be admitted into a representative repository of the world's literatures (Warner 2019: 22; Shankar 2012: 135).²⁴ The idea of the vernacular attached to selected texts by these authors thus allows for claims of commensurability but also of authenticity.

Other than as a means for confirming the authenticity of the African-authored text that continues to circulate locally and internationally mainly in global languages, African writers who have deliberately turned from writing in English and French to writing in African vernaculars have not, however, shown much interest in other potential functions of vernacular language literary texts. They have not, for example, spoken of writing literature in vernacular languages as a means for advancing standardization of their chosen vernaculars. Indeed, advocates for literary vernacularization in Africa almost never acknowledge the existence of multiple varieties of the languages under consideration and often seem to imply that every language has a singular fixed form. For these authors, demonstrating that writing in an African vernacular is even possible or has a history in a specific setting, usually provides the primary motivation for writing in the vernacular, given the preponderance of African-authored texts written in global languages within the grouping of texts known as African literature.

²⁴ In this respect, Warner writes for example: "When an argument breaks out about what *language* literature ought to be written in, a great feat of commensurability has already been performed. At the point at which language becomes the issue, the nature and equivalence of *literature* is increasingly being taken as a given" (2019: 22).

Furthermore, and if authors like Ngũgĩ and Diop have often ended up translating their own vernacular-language texts into global languages, it is not so much in a bid to highlight the gap between the global language and African vernaculars, or to showcase the untranslatables within African vernacular languages, but in order to prove that as an entity, African literature takes shape not only in global languages, but also in African vernaculars. In a sense, then, their commitment to writing in the vernacular cannot be separated from a desire to ensure that literatures in African vernaculars have as much visibility as African literatures that circulate in global languages.

For African-authored texts, composition in the vernacular helps to distinguish between the local and the non-local, a distinction that is sometimes obscured when the text is composed in a language of global power. Being able to point to the fact that works by African authors like Ngũgĩ and Diop were written in an African language clears up this area of tension for African-authored literary works that circulate internationally under the rubric of world literature. In the case of authors like Ngũgĩ and Diop, the claim can now be made that the languages in which the works circulate internationally are not the languages in which they were initially written, thus conforming to the usual pattern for works from other regions of the world also assembled within the framework of world literature. But the standing of such works as true vernacular texts may matter more for the ways in which they are perceived when they enter into the realm of world literature than it does for how these texts are read on home turf. For Diop's *Doomi Golo*, Warner concludes this Wolof-language work could not be considered an instance of "Wolof literary activism in any kind of self-evident or transparent way" (2019: 221). As Warner further (2019: 229) recounts, it was important for the translators of Diop's novel into English to point out that the novel was initially written in Wolof, even though the English-language translation was actually based on the French-language version of the text. Likewise, the fact that Ngũgĩ's *Wizard of the Crow* was written in Gikuyu mattered more for the book's circulation in English than it did for Gikuyu readers since the single-volume novel was first published and circulated in English before the final installments of the multi-volume source text, *Mũrogi wa Kagogo*, were published in Gikuyu (Mwangi 2017: 60). What careful attention to the circulation trajectories of African language works suggests, therefore, is that one cannot fully assess the implications of writing in the vernacular for the circulation of African-authored works without setting the experience of world-famous authors like Ngũgĩ and Diop alongside the experience of authors like Akínwùmí Íṣòlá and Ọládẹ̀jọ

Òkédiji. For the latter authors whose creative writing occurred mostly or entirely in their mother tongues, their works were seldom translated into any language and attracted virtually no engagement whatsoever within the field of criticism of world literature. Their works belong within the large storehouse of Shankar's "literatures of the world" but not within the more restricted grouping of world literature as understood by Damrosch.

A number of small-scale experiments with African vernacular language writing and translation has been attempted in recent years. One such experiment involved the publication of a multilingual anthology of romance stories by a Nigeria based publisher, Cassava Republic under its Ankara Press imprint in 2015.²⁵ Each of the seven stories available for download in the 2015 anthology was written in English and translated into another (usually African) language accompanied by an audio recording of each story read both in English and the language into which the story had been translated.²⁶ This pattern of translation made it possible for the stories to be available to literate and non-literate speakers of individual African languages in which the texts were composed, but also to circulate within the larger ecosystem of African literature, a zone of affinity where participants are bound together, not by shared vernaculars, but by a shared geography, and where the predominant languages of interaction have been English and French.

Notwithstanding such experiments translating short prose texts into African languages, relatively few African authors already writing in English or French and whose works circulate in the world-literature space have followed in the footsteps of Ngũgĩ and Diop. This is in part because African-authored texts become visible within the domain of African literature itself mainly when they are composed in or translated into global languages. And for understandable reasons: participants in the field of African literature continue to rely on selected languages of wider communication which happen to be global languages for most of their interactions. But it is also in large part because African-authored texts rarely show up in world literature lists as works identified with any one African language. Rather, they show up most frequently as works identified with geopolitical constructs, the African continent itself or a specific African country,

²⁵ For more on this, see, e.g., Adejunmobi (2017: 139).

²⁶ Although, as of 2021, the text for the romance stories is no longer available for download from Ankara Press as a PDF, the audio recordings of the stories in English and the languages into which they were translated can still be accessed at: <https://soundcloud.com/ankara-press/sets/valentines-day-anthology-2015>.

but not language. In discussions of world literature, Ngũgĩ appears simply as an African author, not as a Gikuyu-language author. Diop shows up in those discussions simply as an African author, not as a Wolof-language author. In general, literatures specifically attached to African vernacular languages have little to no salience in world-literature spaces, almost certainly because these literatures are often invisible even within the domain of vernacularity signified by the more narrowly defined term of African literature. This is the trend for works by authors who write only or predominantly in African languages. However, and for African writers whose initial presence and reputation in world literature spaces already rests on texts written in global languages, there is a rationale for affiliating their texts that circulate in global languages with African vernacular language writing.

By way of conclusion, I will note that as a political project mostly detached from policy initiatives focused on language, vernacularization has continuing appeal across Africa in the twenty-first century. In dysfunctional postcolonial polities, the appeal of the smaller space as an alternative to unwieldy bigger spaces continues to grow. So also does the trend towards a kind of literary vernacularization that is detached from vernacularization at the level of language policy or a commitment to vernacular literacy. At the same time, the circulation of vernacular-language texts by African authors who write only in the vernacular rarely extends beyond the community of literate mother tongue speakers of the vernacular in question whether they reside at home or are dispersed around the world. Still, and for African authors whose works written in global languages are already well positioned in the stream of international literary flows, writing in the vernacular accompanied by translation remains a sign of irreducible cultural difference with high value within that stream.

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