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A Foundation Takes on Wikipedia's Africa Gap, While Backing Young Creatives on the Continent

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MOLESKINE FOUNDATION CEO ADAMA SANNEH (LEFT) AT WIKIAFRICA EDUCATION EVENT.

If you're a creative type, you've likely heard of the Moleskine notebook, branded as the heir to the little blank books used by the likes of van Gogh, Picasso and Hemingway. Maybe you

even picked one up during quarantine in the hopes of one day being known by surname only. Headquartered in Milan, the Moleskine company has around 500 employees today and a vast network

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of partners. It produces physical and digital notebooks, and even runs cafes.

In 2006, the company launched the [Moleskine Foundation](#), which works with an eye toward Africa at the intersection of three focus areas: innovative education, art and culture for social transformation, and advocacy.

“Creativity is a function of knowledge to a certain extent. It’s not just about having information. It’s about what you’re going to do with it,” says Adama Sanneh, CEO and co-founder of Moleskine Foundation, in a recent interview.

The foundation began as lettera27—an “unconventional cultural incubator”—illustrating the unique philanthropic angle here. And though “incubating culture” might seem a bit nebulous, Sanneh spoke at length about Moleskine’s real impact on the ground, and how it uses creativity as a path toward social change.

Consider its [WikiAfrica Education initiative](#), which launched in 2006 just five years after Wikipedia itself launched. Harnessing the promise of creativity, the initiative has generated over 40,000 Wikipedia contributions since its launch, and over 200 articles in 18 languages about COVID-19 in the past year alone. The goal is to serve as a way to support creative young people on the continent, and also to improve online information about Africa.

But just how did this unconventional foundation get started, why did it partner with Wikimedia, and how is the partnership emblematic of the foundation’s overall aims to impact African youth?

African roots

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Born in Italy as the son of a Muslim West African father and an Italian Catholic mother, Sanneh has long been interested in questions of identity. His honors thesis as a political science major in undergrad was titled “Identity Paradox in the Second Generation of Immigrants in Italy.” He got his feet wet in the world of NGOs, working in Northern Uganda and the capital city Kampala.

After a time, though, Sanneh wondered if he was on the right side of history. “Where was I in the overall international aid machine? Even though we were reaching many people and making a difference... I didn’t feel like I was part of the right system,” he says.

Sanneh went on to earn his MBA from the University of Geneva and then worked as a consultant for the World Intellectual Property Organization, a specialized agency of the United Nations. Working within the Global Challenges Division, he started to realize the power of creative tools to solve global challenges like climate change and food security.

“I entered in the field of art, culture, and education and had a slow but steady epiphany,” Sanneh says with a laugh. “A lot of the questions I had in Uganda, I started to find some answers to.”

Using creativity to change the world

As Lettera27 evolved into Moleskine Foundation, the company behind the organization doubled down its support so that the nonprofit could scale. While backed by the Moleskine company, it operates independently, running its own programs and partnerships while also making grants to aligned organizations.

And with Sanneh at the helm, the foundation was able to get off the ground quickly, thanks to Lettera27's 10-year runway creating partnerships with cultural, creative and educational institutions around Africa.

Consider partner organization Constitution Hill in Johannesburg, a former prison complex from the Apartheid era whose walls held the likes of Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi. Today, Constitution Hill is a living museum that tells the story of South Africa's journey to the present. The foundation has been working with the organization for years, and others like it, even when it wasn't the popular choice.

"Ten years ago, some looked at you like you were some kind of New Age person. But very early on in the game, we had the chance to meet some incredible partners," he says.

Moleskine Foundation works to encourage, inspire and connect young people to transform themselves and then larger society through unconventional educational experiences. One past initiative called the Director's Eye supported authors and producers of African cinema throughout the phases of film development and production.

The foundation also has a long history with Ashoka, the well-known international association of social innovators, and was an early supporter of Ashoka's Changemaker Schools Africa, which has launched dozens of schools and also runs storytelling workshops.

"Where is Africa on Wikipedia?"

As a top-five global website with some 6.1 billion visitors per month, Wikipedia is as ubiquitous as the air we breathe, and the perfect mic drop in an intense internet debate—not that I’m encouraging such a thing. Still, as with many other internet era phenomena, Wikipedia wasn’t always Wikipedia.

“In 2006, lettera27 had an intuition,” Sanneh says. “Where is Africa on Wikipedia? It was intuition, because at the time, Wikipedia wasn’t even a big deal. And I was just a young volunteer.”

The organization decided to make an early bet, partnering with Wikimedia Italia to launch WikiAfrica, an international movement that encourages individuals, interested groups and organizations to create, expand and enhance online content about Africa.

WikiAfrica Education introduces, trains and supports teachers as they incorporate Wikipedia article writing into their lesson plans. The initiative conducts edit-a-thon events so they can learn more about the Wikimedia platform and supports teacher training. Students learn important literacy skills, how to work in collaboration, and best practices and tools relating to critical thinking. The ultimate goal is to build the next generation of online content creators.

“I can tell you, there is more information about the city of Paris now than about the entire African continent,” Sanneh says; he knows the consequences of the lack of online representation for people of color. He recalls the first time he landed in New York and met a Black American, who asked where Sanneh was from. When he said Italy, the man was surprised.

“He’s like, ‘Wait, Italy has Black people?’” Sanneh recalls with a smile.

For these reasons, WikiAfrica is focused on the entire diaspora, impacting people around the world who know what it means to live in a society where you aren’t fully reflected. For instance, Moleskine, in partnership with Constitution Hill and AFROPUNK (conveners of the popular Brooklyn music festival), curated the names of 12 Black South African women who were erased from history.

WikiAfrica created an educational program in which young people could learn about women like [Joyce Seroke](#), a South African educator, activist, feminist and community organizer who fought against apartheid. From there, young people wrote these entries in their own languages—Zulu, Xhosa, Venda and so on.

In one day, the event produced 70 new entries in five African languages about these vital figures.

Another larger “AfroCuration” event focused on the constitution of South Africa and anti-Apartheid efforts, and resulted in more than 200 written articles. Between these two events combined, there were more than 200,000 views from these entries in a few months.

Moleskine Foundation only works with local partners who know the lay of the land and can effectively host events, like Harambee, a youth employment nonprofit. And right now, Sanneh is working hard to find multiple avenues to reach rural areas.

“Sometimes, it’s a struggle,” Sanneh admits, “but compared to when we started, this is a great

improvement. This is why we want to expand this program, and get more co-founding donors.”

A new perception of creativity

Sanneh believes that these creativity tools can be used to get at some of Africa’s more intractable challenges, including housing, water sanitation and food security. But as veteran of this space, he also thinks some reframing could be useful.

“International organizations always ask how they can fix problems. But they never really ask how they can support and develop talent. We are in this second business. I don’t see a dichotomy. We live in a creativity era.... Why should it be different for a young kid in Lagos?” Sannah says.

Moleskine Foundation works on three levels, and its final frontier is working to transform the way creativity is perceived in society. The foundation created a publication called Folio and a podcast called [Creativity Pioneers](#), in-depth conversations with leaders who use creativity to create social change. Harvard graduate Uzodinma Iweala, CEO of Africa Center in New York City, talks about building inclusive cultural institutions, and Raphael Chikukwa, executive director of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, believes that “every revolution starts from the revolution of the mind.”

When I ask Sanneh if he believes this work could help westerners better understand Africa, he says he remains hopeful. But he also says he’s not overly concerned by it, because you can’t really change those who don’t want to change.

African creators themselves are undergoing a new era of visibility around the world, including through

Afrobeats music and so-called “Nollywood” (Nigerian Hollywood) films. Afrobeats artist Burna Boy took home a 2021 Grammy, and was also featured in video game sensation [Grand Theft Auto Online](#).

Three decades ago, Ashoka made early waves in what’s now the established field of social entrepreneurship. If successful, Sanneh thinks Moleskine Foundation can follow the same trajectory as a pioneer in the space of creativity for social change. “We now know how to attract resources, to nurture talent, to bring solutions, and serve millions of people.”

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