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# AFROCURATION

Moleskine Foundation

# The Moleskine Foundation invites Nataal to explore its WikiAfrica Educational initiative in South Africa

Every two seconds, a new edit is made on Wikipedia. Over the course of its history, the English version of the crowd-sourced encyclopaedia platform has amassed over 6.4 million entries from around the globe. And while the space is expanding significantly to include the voices of the global South, there is still much work to be done to shift the amount, diversity and language variety of information available, specifically with regards to Africa. In a world where African music, art, fashion and creativity shapes and defines much of the global cultural landscape, how can we leverage the smarts of African youth to tell our own story on our own terms?

Moleskine Foundation, the Milan-based non-profit organisation and cultural incubator, addresses this with its WikiAfrica Education initiative, which is partnering with institutions across Africa to deliver its AfroCuration programme. The aim is to equip young Africans with the skills to write their own narratives, reclaim their own languages, and in line with the Foundation's mantra, transform themselves and their communities as well. Shrugging off a "teach a man to fish" approach that may assume the needs and contexts of its participants, AfroCuration engage creativity, imagination, learning and play from Africans, and by Africans, in order to expand and enhance the ever-changing story of Africa.

The theme for the current programme is Who We Are - and the ethos drives the thinking and values behind the Moleskine Foundation's co-learning initiatives. The thematic text by writer Lwando Xaso, reads: "To declare who we are holds a power that cannot be denied. Who we are is a search, a discovery and a testimony. It is a gift, not just for us but our progeny. It is a feeling we have for ourselves. It is not iron-clad. It is malleable and evolving, with each generation molding itself as it wishes to be seen, not for the other, but for themselves."

**"Creativity can be an incredible tool to support the development of critical thinking, lifelong learning and a changemaking attitude"**

This vision aligns strongly with a long-persisting identity and knowledge crisis. In 2006, famed Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina released his piece, 'How to Write About Africa', which exposed the caricature, stereotype and limited imagination stemming from much writing about the continent. And in 2021, despite having produced some of the world's cultural, scientific and artistic greats, Wainaina's wry remarks about including sunsets in the imagery, talking about the 'motherland' and never failing to mention the wildlife, still hold true in many knowledge-making and pop culture spaces.

Rather than simply funding new writing, AfroCuration has entrusted its local partners and young participants to develop skills to think through their visions for Africa and inscribe them by creating, developing and editing Wikipedia entries that accurately reflect the pulse of African thinking. Both historical and contemporary entries can act as an archive of previously unknown, or actively hidden information.

For Moleskine Foundation CEO, Adama Sanneh, the mission is by no means a foreign one, and in the light of a historical

tendency for Africans to be spoken for, having a programme that encourages expression through creativity and critical thinking is crucial. "Some would argue that creativity requires knowledge. Unless you have the capacity to know about yourself, your context and your environment, it becomes extremely hard to fully express your potential and imagine more," he explains.



A veteran of international development work, Sanneh has used his experience to rethink how best to reach the people who have the most direct impact on their communities. Scholar and author Arundhati Roy explores this idea in her critiques of global NGO work, which she argues tends to replicate existing power structures, encourage a spoon-feeding approach to education and skills exchange, and ultimately limit the agency of recipients. For Sanneh, this technocratic approach would not work. Instead, the Moleskine Foundation holds the belief that creativity is central to social change. "For me, it's about supporting spaces where criticality and imagination can occur. I realised how creativity can be an incredible tool to support the development of critical thinking, creative doing, lifelong learning and a changemaking attitude," Sanneh says.

So, what does this look like in practice? In November, the Moleskine Foundation hosted a two-day virtual event in South Africa with Constitution Hill and the African arm of Wikimedia. It featured a series of addresses by figures such as former Constitution Court judge Albie Sachs and former Chairperson of the Gender Commission Joy Seroke, as well as practical workshops around social media and activism. In

conjunction with the Wikimedia Community in Nigeria and South Africa, there was also a hands-on edit-a-thon where participants learned how to create Wiki entries, do so in their own language (including isiZulu, Sesotho, Sepedi, isiXhosa and Tshivenda) and build new eco systems of knowledge for themselves and their networks.

Multi-linguist Tochi Precious was a facilitator of the workshops. "Every AfroCuration event is always an exciting one for me," she enthuses. "For the South Africa event, I educated the participants about Wikimedia, the Global Mission to share free knowledge, and the different Wikimedia platforms they can use to share free knowledge. In the breakout room, I also taught them how to translate articles from one language Wikipedia to the other using the content translation tool."

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Precious came to be involved through two of her significant personal interests: "Coffee and the Igbo language! One day, a mentor I follow on Twitter offered coffee in return for joining her in translating articles into Igbo. I went along and got to learn about Wikimedia and its projects. My biggest learning has been to always strive to make sure that free knowledge is available and accessible to others, especially Africans in our different languages," she adds.

isiZulu speaker Lindokuhle Prisca Mdluli was a participant of the South African event and reflects on the new perspectives she gained. "AfroCuration made me feel eager to learn more about my language, culture and history, and also made me want to overcome the imbalances between our native languages and English," she reflects. "I think it's important to have a way to share information so

that it will be passed from generation to generation and that way, our history and culture can be preserved.”

For sciences student, Philadelphia Mokoena, another participant whose home language is SeSotho, the programme offered something else: “I’m in the science community where everything is about research and facts and proofs. Wiki is step one for me now in terms of learning how to write the correct content down and the correct procedure for recording information online. When I start doing research in my field, I will already have gained a lot of experience in citing correctly and knowing how to use CrossRef might help enhance the proof I would need to provide. So, this learning experience is very important to me,” says Mokoena.



The perspectives of these participants lean strongly into the thinking of digital optimists, who believe in the technical power of the internet being matched by human creativity and imagination to build better, more efficient, and more equal societies. In her work on the ‘digital commons’, media studies thinker Janet Wasko argues that the internet shouldn’t be seen purely as a technical tool but rather a space with huge emancipatory potential. She believes that information and knowledge sharing, co-created virtual spaces and a collaborative approach (as we’re already seeing on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram) allow individuals to feel part of a broader project and more invested in producing quality content. In the same spirit, AfroCuration stitches together what Sanneh believes is the trinity of changemaking: “knowledge, creativity and activism”.

For AfroCuration facilitator Lwando Xaso, the mission aligns with her interests in offering better information for ordinary people. As a constitutional lawyer, writer and historian, Xaso is invested in how best to communicate the power and potential of the constitution for the people it is intended to serve, and do so in an intersectional way. “If young people are not steeped in the history, the text and the practical use of the constitution then we have no constitutional democracy,” she asserts. “AfroCuration allows young people to take responsibility for our history - it is physically in their hands so the future depends on what they do today and what older generations pass on to them. AfroCuration is an amplification of this history and also allows the history we are making today to live securely online for posterity.”

At the heart of the programme is the belief that communities - and even a continent where 60 per cent of its population is under 25 - can be transformed through the creativity and intelligence of its youth. Considering global trends around work futures, the skills we need for 2050 and beyond, and the increased need for collaboration towards global solutions, AfroCuration offers tools to the curious, critical thinkers who will shape Africa’s tomorrow. Harnessing their expertise and partnering with the appropriate, authoritative voices, participants are encouraged to imagine far beyond their original horizons of expectation.

For Sanneh, the unknown horizon is the best part. “What excites me most is that I don’t know what will happen with the programme in terms of what people do with it. I don’t know what the context will be, or what the priorities are so there’s a lot of space for things to grow and develop well beyond what we even think participants will do with it. That’s the beauty - it’s yours to make more from.”

*For more information about the Moleskine Foundation and its initiatives, **explore its website.***