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AFROCURATION MOZAMBIQUE

Moleskine Foundation

Indigenous Mozambican language Makhuwa makes its Wikipedia debut thanks to the AfroCuration project

Marcelino dos Santos is a remarkable figure in Mozambique's national history. An intellect and revolutionary, dos Santos was a key organiser and strategist during the country's struggle against Portuguese rule. Now, through the Moleskine Foundation's WikiAfrica Education programme, his protest poetry is among 860 new Wikipedia entries written in Emakhuwa/Makhuwa, an indigenous language spoken by nearly 25 percent of the local population.

The pages were generated during three edit-a-thons held between 2021 and 2022 geared towards the digital archiving and transmission of Mozambican cultural heritage and identity. Participants created original content and received technical training from Wikipedia gurus (Wikimedians) on how to upload and edit the articles. Though still in the incubation stage – meaning the content development process is being monitored to determine whether the new language might gain a stand-alone domain – these debut Makhuwa pages have already accrued over 27,000 hits.

“We need to leave the behaviour of seeing our languages as those of minorities or as languages that can't make progress. We need to cultivate the behaviour that our languages have the same power that other languages have,” says Luciano Panela, a professor at Universidade Rovuma. The institute is the first in the world to offer a Makhuwa Studies course as a way to redress the historic

bias against and disruption of original languages. In April 2022, it played host to the first hybrid session in the AfroCuration Mozambique series. The two-day online and in-person assembly was produced by Moleskine Foundation in collaboration with Ethale Publishing and supported by Wikimedia Foundation and Fondazione Aurora.



There is considerable local interest in this digital culture work. Each assembly typically gets as many as 100 sign-ups. For Maputo-based publishers, Alex Macbeth and Jessemusse Cacinda of Ethale, the goal is to create cohorts with a blend of enthusiasm and competence. “We try to bring people to the group with an academic background in Makuwa and Mozambique Bantu languages as well as people who participated in the national language

standardisation workshops,” says Cacinda, referring to sessions at Eduardo Mondlane University aiming to unify Mozambican languages. With over 20 languages spoken in the country and Portuguese only the minority’s first tongue, knowledge sharing must take a multilingual approach.

Given the broad nature of session themes – the poetic prompt ‘who we are’, local geography and inspiring figures – it remains prudent to invite as many voices as possible.

Macbeth says, “Participants come in with all sorts of skill sets and some people need a little bit more help with editing and writing. We don’t leave anyone behind. Everyone has a space in our ecosystem.” The resulting entries are reflective of this variety in perspectives. Makuwa readers can access information about **Koronaviiru** (Coronavirus), **Universitaati Eduardo Mondlane efacultaati yaengenhariya** (Eduardo Mondlane University) and facts about **Maputo** among others topics. While some of the entries are short and not as detailed as the typical Wikipedia entry, it is clear that there is a conscious effort to centre the local community as the first and most important audience. That the texts exist at all is a triumph.

AfroCuration Mozambique can be seen as a fulfilment of the seventh tenet of the Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures. Formulated over 20 years ago, the declaration contends that modern technology has a crucial role to play in the evolution of African vernaculars and texts. “This work of developing African languages is not just good for Africa, it is good for humanity in general because we are developing different languages and the multilingual sphere,” says Cacinda.

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The Mozambique assemblies certainly come from a recognition of the dearth in representation within Wikipedia. The first African entry in the online encyclopaedia is Swahili but it appears after 77 other languages and features less than 100,000 articles. The inclusion of Makhuwa is a positive step forward. “It is always exciting to see new communities leverage the power of Wikimedia projects to create access to locally grown and relevant knowledge,” says Rudolph Ampofo, Senior Regional Projects Manager at Wikimedia Foundation.

And, the possibilities of this knowledge creation work expand with each new iteration of the programme. For instance, the October 2022 edition leaned into peacebuilding. “Participants were asked to publish 30 articles as a symbolic sign in commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the Rome General Peace Accord. This is one of the ways in which Mozambicans can help spread the country's history and commitment to justice to the entire Emakhuwa community,” says Dina Rosa Agyemang and Marta Sachy from Fondazione Aurora. The Italian non-profit has been a champion for the AfroCuration series since the first edition at Johannesburg’s Constitution Hill in 2019; going on to support the project’s 2020 ‘The Solution will not be Televised’ campaign.

Fondazione Aurora also manages the ‘cultural reflection’ moments within the assemblies. These are lectures designed to uplift and educate the participants so that they leave the sessions feeling both accomplished and motivated to do more. The speakers are drawn from the cultural-historical panorama of the community. AfroCuration Mozambique has seen historian Celestino Mussomar, sociologist Tassiana Tomè and musicians Deltino Guerreiro and Contantino Warila invited to address the participants. Their presentations were warm and conversational; often reflections on their creative lives and their connection to the Makhuwa language and culture.

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It is this three-pronged approach of incorporating technical lessons, ensuring diversity amongst attendees and hosting inspiring speakers that have made AfroCuration a continuing success. So far happening in South Africa, Ghana, Tanzania, Italy and Zimbabwe as well as Mozambique, these events have generated new articles in Swahili, Twi, Egyptian Arabic, Igbo, Shona, Yoruba, Amharic, Sesotho, Tshivenda, isiZulu, isiXhosa and Afrikaans, among others.

The final winning ingredient is a dedication borne from shared values. AfroCuration Mozambique is a shining example of this. Participant Tomás Armando, another professor at Universidade Rovuma, had been working in the community for some time collecting folktales and transcribing the narrations. He was delighted to find like-minded proponents for the preservation of Makhuwa language and culture at the event. “At first, I was invited to serve as a facilitator to translate from English to Portuguese. During the initial session I got interested in the project myself,” Armando says. “From the second session, I started working to assist the local editors and by the last session, I was indicated to work as a facilitator for the new editors because I had developed enough experience as an editor in Portuguese and Emakhuwa. I have created a group of users with training in Emakhuwa language who are going to work as guardians to improve the texts published on the incubator.”

Moleskine Foundation co-founder Elena Korzhenevich is heartened by such developments. The Milan-based non-profit organisation is dedicated to nurturing a new generation of creative thinkers. So, she recognises that it takes a village to achieve and sustain this pan-African movement of knowledge creation with local community players necessarily taking the lead. “The effort we are doing in Mozambique is particularly significant to us because Makhuwa was not present in the digital landscape,” she says. “We have been excited to see that the participants of the events have been inspired and empowered by the experience to organise their own events and have even

obtained funding from WikiMedia Foundation to continue the effort of creating knowledge in the Makhuwa language.”



Ethale Publishing are also doing their part to transmit more Makhuwa content. “We’ve created a series of podcasts and YouTube Lives exploring oral traditions and literature with interesting figures in the Makhuwa landscape,” says Macbeth. They’ve also gone a step further and launched the Ethale Books app that features free audiobooks and e-books from top African authors in Portuguese, Swahili and English.

Korzhenevich contends that the next frontier will be to integrate AfroCuration Mozambique into Universidade Rovuma’s educational programme in order to ensure replicability of the project and continuous, autonomous growth at the local level. To that end, they have a new event slated for February 2023 and return to Constitution Hill in March. With UNESCO having declared 2022-2032 the ‘International Decade of Indigenous Languages’, the programme finds its place within a global movement to ensure the preservation and revitalisation of native languages.

“We will hold a workshop with the Wikimedia communities and cultural partners to co-think and co-design ways to include WikiAfrica Education and AfroCuration into their programming,” says Korzhenevich. “The big dream for this or next year is to organise a Panafrikan AfroCuration event that would involve hundreds of youths from various African countries in the knowledge creation session. The objective remains to keep growing the movement and provide tools,

create spaces and opportunities for the young people to tell the world who they are.”

Read Nataal’s story about AfroCuration in South Africa **here**.

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

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