



# “The Little Leopard that Became a Big Leopard”

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**A**cademic libraries often collect new books in electronic formats, from print sellers who include complete catalog records, or include publishing details that are easily and efficiently recorded by catalogers. Global databases of library catalogs like *WorldCat* are freely available, making even unusual books easy to find. But when a modest booklet found its way to Principal Cataloger William (Hank) Young’s desk in the summer of 2023, he found few clues to describe it. A small, stapled, same-cover pamphlet with the title in an unknown language and a short, simply illustrated text was all that Hank had to go by. While *Google Translate* suggested it was written in Swedish, he quickly ruled that out since it was part of Donald Abraham’s African history book collection. Most of the Abraham books are from former Portuguese colonies in Africa: mainly Angola and Mozambique, with some titles from Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe, and Equatorial Guinea. Without an author, publisher, or place of publication given, Hank contacted African Studies Collections Curator Daniel Reboussin to identify the language, so that he could describe it for the catalog and allow anyone to find it.

Dan consulted Haven Hawley, then Chair of the Libraries’ Special & Area Studies Collections Department, and a national expert in printing history. With her guidance and a recommended reference source,<sup>1</sup> he examined the text and illustrations with a magnifying loupe, allowing him to identify the characteristic “blobs” that form letters during mimeograph reproduction.

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<sup>1</sup> Batterham, Ian. 2008. *Office Copying Revolution: History, Identification and Preservation: A Manual for Conservators, Archivists, Librarians and Forensic Document Examiners*. Canberra: National Archives of Australia.

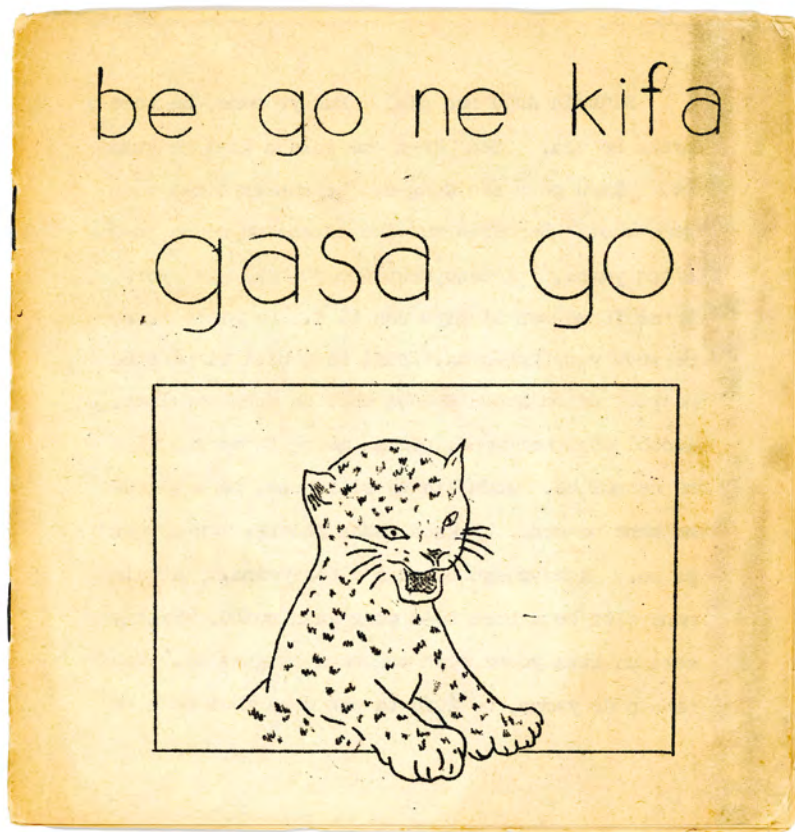


Fig. 1: *Little Leopard* Front Cover - an old book showing text in Gbaya and a simplistic drawing of a juvenile leopard.

The loupe also revealed how illustrations of the leopards' spots were created by repeated, stenciled patterns. The evidence of these printing processes and tools offered important clues that the booklet was produced during the mid-twentieth century, most likely before the mid-1950s.

The booklet's provenance along with the images of hunters and leopards signaled that it was created in Africa, but thousands of languages are spoken on the world's most linguistically diverse continent.<sup>2</sup> We needed an expert to identify the language, but even UF's African Languages specialists were stumped. Dan transcribed the title and a paragraph of the booklet's text before sharing our query with colleagues on an international distribution list for African Studies librarians, requesting help with this mystery from any African language experts.

Our efforts reached several linguists affiliated with elite institutions and the publishers of *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*,<sup>3</sup> among others. Our email provoked interesting discussions and analyses from linguists at Stanford, Columbia, Yale, Harvard, Cambridge, and SIL International for two weeks before we picked up on a few comments mentioning Cameroon in West Africa. Dan wrote


2 Berghoff, Robyn and Emanuel Bylund. 2023. "Africa's linguistic diversity goes largely unnoticed in research on multilingualism." *The Conversation*. Available online: <https://theconversation.com/africas-linguistic-diversity-goes-largely-unnoticed-in-research-on-multilingualism-208204>.

3 Eberhard, David M., Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig (eds.). 2024. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. Twenty-seventh edition. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. Online version: <http://www.ethnologue.com>.

to his colleague Andrew Noss, MDP Program Coordinator at UF's Grinter Hall, who he knew had lived there with his family. Andy's response came back quickly, in a message with, "this looks like Gbaya from Cameroon (and the) Central African Republic (CAR)." He said that his father, Dr. Philip A. Noss could confirm this, which in fact he did that day: "The text is good Gbaya but written early before missionaries were attuned to a couple of important features of language or didn't yet have the orthographic tools that have become available to us." After our messages were transmitted across the hemisphere, with experts contributing good insights and analyses, we were finally in touch with a professional linguist who had written a dissertation on the specific language we needed to identify. And he lives in Gainesville, though he happened to be travelling during the previous few weeks!

Phil translated the title for us as *The Little Leopard that Became a Big Leopard* and, based on his knowledge of missionary work at Sudan Mission in Meiganga, Cameroon, he confirmed that the pamphlet was likely written in the 1940s by linguists there. At Meiganga and in nearby CAR, Phil knew that Canadian linguist

Madel Nostbakken served as Book Editor with overall responsibility for Gbaya language work until her retirement in 1975. She may be the author, but we do not know that for certain.

The pamphlet (rendered as *bé gɔ, ne kifa gásá gɔ*, in modern Gbaya orthography and the main title) is now cataloged for Rare Books, along with about twenty more books donated by Phil Noss. Hank next had to learn to use OCLC's translation tables, which allow non-Roman characters to be searchable in OCLC and in library discovery systems. Once the vernacular characters were added to the record, he uploaded it to the OCLC database. He also added to the catalog record that the *Little Leopard...* includes elements of traditional storytelling in the form of a Christian parable and that it was distributed as part of the mission's language translation and literacy program. As a result of uncovering this 80-year-old mystery of a modest but precocious pamphlet, the Smathers Libraries may now own one of the largest collections of Gbaya teaching resources documented in *WorldCat*. But the *Little Leopard* will always be our favorite title in this collection! 

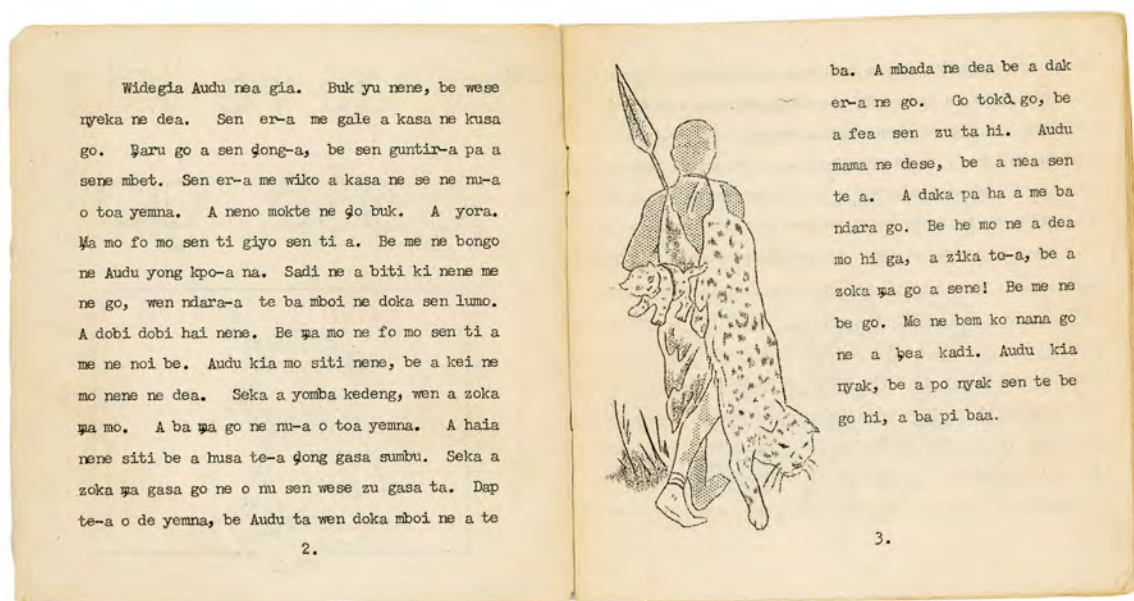


Fig. 2: *Little Leopard* - Open book with text in the language, Gbaya, and an illustration of a spear-holder draped in a leopard-pattern garment.

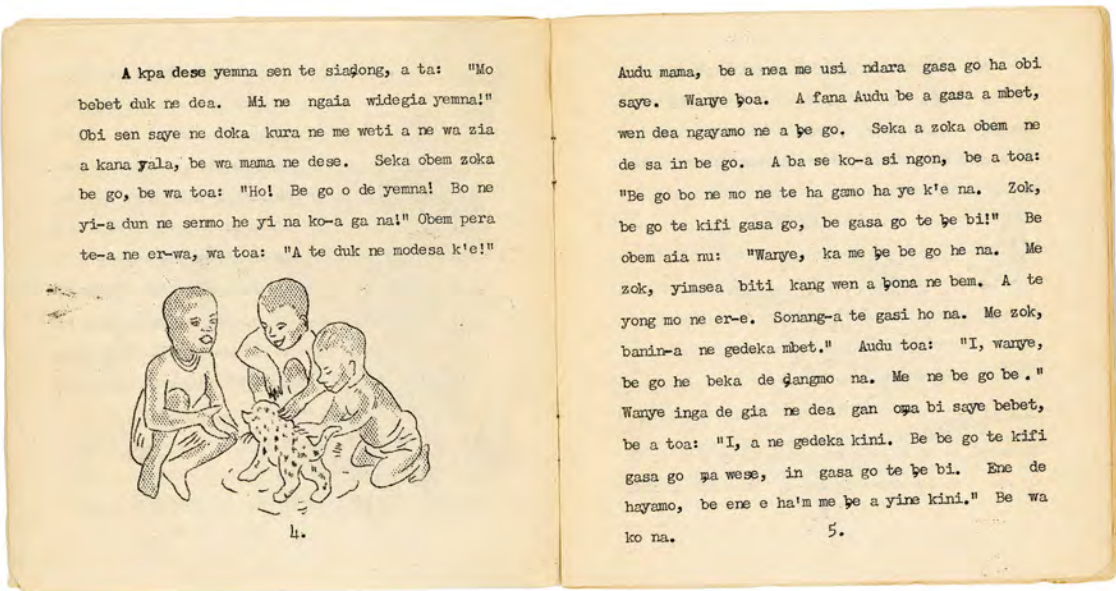


Fig. 3: *Little Leopard* - Open book with text in the language, Gbaya, and an illustration of three children with a small leopard.

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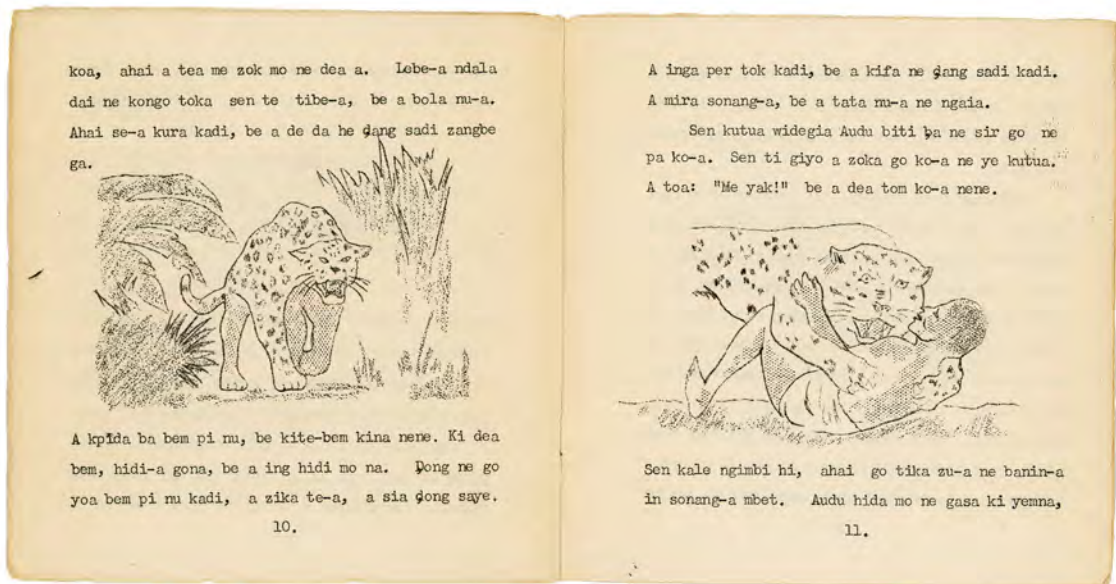


Fig. 4: *Little Leopard* - Two pages from an illustrated book featuring text and drawings of a leopard and a person.