

# ***Ìgbélárugẹ̀ Èdè: Akinwumi Isola's Model for Promoting African Languages***

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## **Abstract**

The ever-popular discussion in African literary circles is critically about language choices that African writers make in their creative endeavors. This is part of this write-up's focus plus the plight of African languages with attention to the benefit and challenges for their empowerment. We set out to achieve two goals in this essay; first contributing to the ongoing discussions on African mother tongues, their vital roles in African literatures while characterizing pointers on proficiency and performance. Second, considering the use of Yoruba language in creative works of late Akínwùmí Oròjídé Iṣòlá. Expectedly, the latter goal will exemplify the importance of indigenous languages to African writers. In pursuance of these dual goals, it is critical to highlight areas in which African writers, especially those writing in their native African languages, have endured to play crucial roles in promotion of African languages. These highlighted areas go beyond now fashionable and expressed goal of focusing on literature in African languages (splendor in African languages) onto push for fairness for languages and their speakers (linguistic justice).

<p>Isola, Akinwumi. <i>Born Ibadan, Nigeria, Dec. 24, 1939. Education: primary and secondary school, Ibadan: University of Ibadan (B.A., Dip Ling., M.A., PhD in Yoruba). Lecturer in Yoruba literature, University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria: currently senior lecturer and acting Head of</i></p>	<p><i>Department of African Languages and Literatures, University of Ife, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Major works include: Eḡúnṣetán Aníwúrà, Kòṣeégbé, Madame Tinúbú, Wèrè Lèsìn, Ayé Yẹ Wón Tán and Olú Ọmọ, plays, in Yorùbá: Àfàìmọ, collection of poems, in Yorùbá: and Ogún Ọmọdé, novel in Yoruba. (Nichols, 1981: 58)</i></p>
<p>Introduction of author by Lee Nichols in <i>Conversations with African Writers</i>, published by VOA in 1981</p>	

### **Limited Access and Linguistic Injustice: A Succinct Consideration**

The 42nd annual conference of the African Literature Association (ALA) held in Atlanta focused on issues of justice and human dignity in Africa and its Diaspora. As noted in the ALA call, artists, filmmakers and writers from Africa and its diaspora often explore possibilities for justice and challenges to human dignity in the face of various forms of oppression.<sup>1</sup> These literary and cultural texts offer alternative visions that counter myopic and prejudicial media portrayals of Africa and its people. Ultimately, 2016 conference organizers believed that an emphasis on justice and human dignity would give room for critically reflecting on, as well as celebrating, current state of creative work from Africa and the diaspora. In our opinion, fundamental to any consideration of justice and human dignity on the African continent should be consideration of status and empowerment of African languages. As we noted elsewhere, in many African countries, the language of economic advancement continues to be the colonial language of the nation. In Nigeria, it is English; In Angola, it is Portuguese, and in Burkina Faso, it is French (Ojo, 2016).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) explained in 2012 that language is key to all people's inclusion in all its heralded Millennium Goals. As UNESCO appreciated, language is at the center of human activity, self-expression and identity. Recognizing the primary importance that people place on their language fosters the kind of true participation in development that achieves lasting results. UNESCO clearly understood that people and their culture adapt both in response to the world in which they reside as well as the dynamism of the languages that they

speak. Therefore, in order to create communication connections between local and global communities, the development of local languages (such as African languages in Africa) is an indispensable tool.

Owomoyela (1996) and Bamgbose (2006) provides further arguments to support the position of the international cultural organization. They make the substantial case that progressive hope for Africa is to be found in valuing the continent's rich traditions as foundational stones for development in current age. Conjecturally, the adoption of African languages by Africans will imply elevation of their African cultural identity (Ojo, 2016). As a result, the adoption will elevate the level of creativity and extent of literacy in these African languages. It was therefore heartening to witness the renewed engagement with creativity in African languages at the 42<sup>nd</sup> ALA conference. It featured the groundbreaking development of the first formal luncheon of the Afrophone Caucus of the African Literature Association (ACALA).

Laudable as these goals and activities were, it would be regrettable on our part if we did not point out one tough challenge. The debates about Africa, languages, and literatures often omit the point that referenced African languages are, at some level, economic burdens for their speakers who lack education or have a low level of literacy in a European language. The contention, as noted by Nigeria's one-time Education minister, Babs Fafunwa (1990) is that in most African countries, 'we impart knowledge and skills almost exclusively in these foreign languages, while the majority of our people, farmers and craftsmen perform their daily tasks in Yoruba, Hausa, Wolof, Ga, Igbo, Bambara, Kiswahili etc... The question is; Why not help them to improve their social, economic, and political activities via their mother tongue? Why insist on their learning English or French first before modern technology could be introduced to them?' (103).

Undoubtedly, language is the prime carrier of knowledge found in most Indigenous African Knowledge Systems. The devaluing of African languages on the continent is by logic, devaluing of African Indigenous knowledge contained in those languages. A language represents the worldview and ontology of its speakers and the descriptions of abstracted ideas that might elude translation. One of the challenges confronting the preservation of unique identity of African indigenous and local knowledge within the increasingly globalized and westernized world is unfortunately, the detrimental attitude of Africans themselves towards the distinctively indigenous African knowledge systems (Ojo, 2016b).

The scope of these damaging attitudes varies from devaluation of these indigenous African knowledge systems to their outright rejection. It appears that centuries of Eurocentric education have resulted in Africans believing that there is only one way to think, act and express oneself, and that way is the

western way in European languages. Indisputably, Africa's long and eventful history summarily puts paid to the unfortunate attitude. Any level of familiarity with the survival and fortitude of the great African civilizations contends for presence of local, oral, applicable and critical knowledge systems within the various indigenous African societies. An area where the challenge of African indigenous knowledge system's devaluation within the increasingly westernized African societies is the area of literature especially as produced in indigenous African languages.

Given Africa's colonial history and linguistic neo-colonialism coupled with the deleterious attitudes of African elites, the questions about language choice and language use are more significant for African literature than any other literature. Owomoyela (1996) rightly argued, "Literature is inconceivable outside the context of language. Questions pertaining to language routinely arise either implicitly or explicitly in any discussion of the subject" (3). Moreover, as our focused writer, Akinwumi Isola declared in 2006, serving the immediate society (Yoruba, in his case) is the most crucial and indispensable duty of literature. Isola highlighted this point in an interview conducted at his residence in Nigeria by Akintunde Akinyemi on July 24, 2006. The interview was published two years later in the groundbreaking volume (*Emerging Perspectives on Akinwumi Isola*) edited by Akinyemi and Falola (2008: 429 – 452). In the interview, Isola made the following point:

Literature has existed in all societies, including Yorùbá, for a long time. Moreover, literature is, primarily, about a particular society, a particular language. You cannot talk about literature without talking about language because literature specifically find expression in a particular language. The first of the duties of a writer, therefore, is to cater to that particular language—the mother tongue. I said it in my article in *Research in African Literature* that there is what I consider a "cultural ecosystem" just like the bio-ecosystem. There are so many aspects of culture: the legal aspect, the literary, the religious, and many other aspects. However, it is language that organizes everything. You cannot discuss any aspect of culture without using the language. Therefore, language is strategically located at the center of culture. So, literature is part of that ecosystem, it is at the center to monitor what happens everywhere. Therefore, it is only through language that literature can rejuvenate, regenerate, organize and set things right in the culture. If you are English or Japanese, it is the language that you speak that would determine what sort of literature you will write and in what language to write it. Only the mother tongue can tell you what to do and how to do it correctly. Therefore, when people ask me why I write in my mother tongue, then, they are wondering and ignoring the most essential aspect of

the duty of literature which is to serve the immediate society. (Akintunde and Falola, 2008: 447)

### **The Mother Tongue Question in African Literature**

The easiest and best ways for Africans to preserve the unique identity of African indigenous and local knowledge is to document and create literature in their mother tongue. African literary critics must toil to produce and increase more works of criticism and analysis in African languages. In his contribution to ‘*the Language Question*’ discussions in 1992, Akinwumi Isola stated that ‘*literary ecosystem*’ is similar to the bio-ecosystem with many aspects of culture from legal, literary and religious amongst others. In his assertion, language is the indispensable prime organizer strategically located at the center of culture. As Isola concluded, literature is also at the center of this ecosystem monitoring all and engaging language to ‘rejuvenate, regenerate, organize and set things right in the culture’ (25-26).

Consequently, speculating about Isola’s choice of Yoruba, his mother tongue for his writings is basically, disregarding the core responsibility of his literary work, which is to serve the immediate Yoruba society. Yoruba, his mother tongue is the language that Isola considers core to Yoruba culture and through which the creation, rejuvenation, regeneration and organization of Yoruba literature for greater and better purpose occurs. By this token, mother tongue is the language in which the writer’s native ability, all things being equal, is best displayed. The outstanding question for the cohort of African writers to answer would be what is their mother tongue? Which African language is ‘*the language with which they were born?*’

As Mazisi Kunene (1992) outlined in his reasoning for writing in Zulu, his mother tongue, “language was (also) meant to operate as an instrument for the re-assertion of African values, African history, and a whole ideology justifying the existence of the African world against ‘their world’” (27). The reference to ‘their’ in this quote denotes the foreign occupiers in South Africa – the British and the Afrikaners. Bolstering the argument for the importance of African languages to African literature, Ruhumbika (1992) further stated, “African national languages are also the only languages in which a thriving African literature is possible” (80). He continues, “A thriving literature is a literature that forms a part of a people’s living culture. It is a literature written for the people, reflecting their endeavors and aspirations, and reaching a significant number of them in a way that can influence their society and be influenced by it in turn” (80).

The enduring discussion on need for writers from Africa to employ indigenous African languages in their creative writing appears hinged on an implied

belief about the linguistic competence of most African writers in their respective African languages. Furthermore, there is the assumption that majority of Africans are not only literate in their respective mother tongues but have significant interest in consuming literature in these languages. The two dominant positions on the issue that is apparent in the literature indirectly projects these assumptions. There is the first opinion that African writers should write in African languages and that African literature only consists of those works written in African languages. This often labeled 'relativist' position that has been held by many writers and critics such as Obi Wali, David Diop, Gabriel Ruhumbika, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

Incidentally, Nguĩ and his 1986 work, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* have in recent times both become the querulous symbols of this position. The basis for this position is the premise that African languages, as repositories of cultural values and the intimate and formative experiences of their speakers must undergo a few scaffoldings. These consist of removal of the colonial stigma, restoration of their literary viability and revival through new literary works. To this group of thinkers, the African population will be able to read, eager to connect, and excited to consume the produced literature that they will perceive as closer and relevant to their existence.

There is also other more restrained 'universalist' opinion that recognizes legitimacy of literature in African languages but does not concur with the notion that African literature consists of only those works written in African languages. This view is shared by many writers and critics including Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ama Ata Aidoo, Zaynab Alkali and Abiola Irele to name a few. To these individuals, African literature written in European languages is historically legitimate and enriches both the languages and the literature itself. To this group, African writers writing in European languages actually appear to have greater task of having to be highly competent in these languages in order to tell essentially African stories. The value of this position notwithstanding, we reason loss of value for Africa's indigenous knowledge is so demoralizing that priority must go to the production of literature and more in African languages.

Reviewing most of the exchanges on the issue, it appears that a generally shared position is the implicit belief that most African writers and critics are literate (able to read and write) in their native languages and possess enough competence to write proficiently. In fact, discussions about language in African creative writing must expand to interrogate extent to which African writers producing their works in European languages could consistently engage the literal and figurative uses of African languages in their creative writing. Isola (1992) suggests that writers who do not write or are unable to write in



any African language should support a program of active translation into the mother tongue. Illustratively, it is one thing for a writer of Yoruba origins to have the ability to show competence in the daily use of Yoruba. It is definitely a different challenge for the writer to use the language figuratively for creative writing.

Apart from the competency issue, there is also a perspective sandwiched by the two positions that wonders about the development of African languages themselves such that they will become viable tools in all domains of human endeavor including literature. As Es'kia Mphahlele, late South African writer observed, it feels that the use of African languages in modern creative writing must await their (African languages) development to meet the needs of systematic, analytic contemporary thought (Mphahlele, 2002). This process of developing African languages to better participate in the social, cultural and economic development of the continent is language empowerment – the development of African languages for increased functionality in multiple areas including specialized domains. One of the means of empowerment therefore is the creation of metalanguages. An increasingly needed requirement for all African languages that would allow cross-language criticism of literature in African languages.

Finally, on this constant '*language issue*' in African literature, there are two growing segments of the population in most African countries whose contemporary experiences must also be incorporated into the conversation. First are children born to the economic and social elites for whom European languages such as English and French are their mother tongues. These are the first language speakers of European languages resident on the African continent. With increased affluence and state sponsored wealth generation, this population is ever growing. Linguistically, some of these Africans actually do have yet another European or non-African language as their second languages with the African language of their immediate environment relegated to sparse usage, if at all. Remarkably, some of these Africans are multi-cultural but monolingual speakers of their specific European language. Apparently, the works of Ngũgĩ's *Afro-European* writers will serve the needs of this population. In fact, it is striking to note that some of the emerging African writers producing in European languages today belong to this population.

If indeed, as Kunene (1992) declared, that language was to be the re-insertion instrument for African values, history and ideology justifying African existence, then there is already some form of socio-linguistic occupation taking place amongst this population and it will take a lot of work to figure out what linguistic profiles these Africans will be asserting. Equally, there is the group of Africans who, thanks to the challenges of the use of foreign languages as medium instruction and the flagging standards of education in

many African countries, are neither proficient nor fully literate in their first African language or a second European language. This is a growing population and a viable market for literary works as well. It is intriguing that for this population, the options with language is further expanding within their communities. These linguistic options principally include the ‘broken’ versions of the dominant European language (e.g. broken English in Nigeria or broken French in Senegal).

These deviance (for lack of a better term) speech forms co-exist and can sometimes be confused with the more systematic English-based and French-based pidgins in West and Central Africa. These European language-based pidgins are creolized speech forms that are also viable language options for this population. A notable difference between the atypical ‘broken’ forms and the systematic pidgins and creoles is the engagement of the latter in most spheres of life in many West and Central African countries including mass media, political discourse, and popular culture such as music, drama and other creative arts. Another option for this population is codeswitching between their African language and European language or ultimately, the emergence of hybrid ‘urban’ languages or urban vernaculars (McLaughlin, 2009; Makoni et. al, 2007) like *Sheng* (Swahili and English) in Kenya and East Africa; *Tsotsitaal* (Afrikaans, Zulu & Sotho in South Africa); or *Indoubil* (Swahili, French, English & Lingala) in Congo.

The conversation about *language issue* has been ongoing engagement in African literature since 1960s. Eme and Mbagwu (2011) highlight a major factor underpinning the *language issue* conversation as non-development and underdevelopment of African languages. A situation we have similarly assessed here with added concerns about literacy or its lack in indigenous African languages, even amongst the creatives and critics engaged in the *language issue* in African literature. Thrust of our assessment is expressly about empowerment of African languages. Concisely, “for one to talk about proper language to use in the creation of African literature, one must understand fundamental realities of its philosophies. One must answer the question: what language or languages best serve the interests of cultural, social, and economic development within the African world?” (Kunene, 1992:29).

### **Akinwumi Isola, Model for Promoting African Languages**

Our featured writer, Akinwumi Isola appears to have devoted majority of his creative energy to addressing this cogent question from Omdala Kunene. He appears to have discovered that it is the Yoruba language that best serve the interest of cultural, social, and economic development within the Yoruba world. In this final section, we consider the adoption of the Yoruba language in Akinwumi Isola’s works. Until his death in 2018, Isola was a renowned



Nigerian and Yoruba scholar, playwright, novelist, and poet. He understood the fundamental realities of his society's philosophies and dedicated his life to cultural promotion, particularly using the language of the society. **Isola**, who wrote in several genres, significantly contributed to African language promotion efforts by producing most of his literary works in his mother tongue, Yoruba. Earlier in his career, Isola was one of the few courageous African writers that chose to write in indigenous African languages in the 1970s when it was very difficult to get any national or international recognition for writing in indigenous African languages. Two of his earlier works were the 1970 historical play, *Èfúnṣetán Aníwúrà* and the 1974 love story novel, *Ó Le Kú*.

Isola's works are significant markers in the chronology of Yorùbá literature and are classics. In recent past, there have been different studies about Isola's use of Yorùbá language in his creative works both from standpoint of language choice as well as from use of language as a tool for creating meaning. Different works have focused on the motivations for Isola's choice. In the discussion of five works focused on Isola's choice of the Yoruba language instead of the supposedly universal English language, Falola and Akinyemi (2008) noted, "Isola has consistently used his writings for Yorùbá linguistic expansion in the face of the dominance of English in national life and the educational curriculum of Nigeria. Therefore, Isola's creative works raise specific and historically significant questions about language theory as well as question about aesthetic policy" (10).

Granting Owomoyela's (1996) condition that language use is the only means through which creative writers comprehensibly reveal their soul and the totality of their worldview and identity, ultimately Isola's soul, identity and worldview were undeniably Yoruba. Many of his contemporaries have noted that Isola's mastery of the Yoruba language is simply beyond compare; and that his insistence on using Yorùbá for his writing was a courageous choice aimed at sustaining and promoting Yorùbá culture particularly against the eroding pressures of globalization. Isola's creative works therefore raise questions about both language theory and aesthetic strategy.

On the other hand, he was known for deploying the Yoruba language in his creative works for the exposition of his strongly held opinions and inclinations about Yoruba society. As Arohunmolase (2008) summaries, Isola "manipulates language to reveal some of his beliefs and aspirations about the nature of Yorùbá society in particular and Nigerian societies in general" (157). Isola's use of language therefore shows that he was "a master craftsman in his creative use of language. He uses Yorùbá idioms, euphemisms, irony, similes, metaphors, personification, and historicopoetic and institutional materials copiously" (Arohunmolase 2008: 157). Isola consistently used his writings for Yorùbá linguistic expansion in the face of English dominance in national life

and educational curriculum of Nigeria. The field of Yoruba language study, in general and literature in Yoruba language, in particular, must recognize and perpetually honor writers such as Isola and others who made the conscious effort to write in their indigenous languages when there were other more convenient and profitable options.

Akinwumi Isola's choice as a model for Yoruba language promotion (*ìgbélarugẹ èdè*) in this essay is not accidental. He was extraordinarily successful in his creative writing career, even with the choice of Yoruba as his preferred language of creativity. Femi Osofisan, the legendary professor of theater arts at the University of Ibadan once noted about Isola's dogged engagement of the Yoruba language for his works as not just "an act of personal idiosyncrasy, but a courageous choice aimed at sustaining and promoting the Yoruba culture, and protecting it against the eroding pressures of globalization. Indeed, it can be said without contradiction that, without Isola's ceaseless advocacy along with a few others, without the examples they gave of sustained creativity in it, the Yoruba language would have joined by now the sad list of dying languages in Africa." (See Falola and Akinyemi, 2008: cover blurb). Isola is a model for Yoruba language promotion (*ìgbélarugẹ èdè*) because his advocacy for the language was best illustrated by his engagement of the language for his greatest creative works.

Ultimately, the genesis of Isola's laudable commitment to the Yoruba language is perhaps more deeply entrenched and completely aligned with the purpose of Isola's creative writing in the first instance. The writer believed, beyond any doubt, that since every society has literature, and literature is essentially about the particular society, the language of the society becomes an indispensable element of the literature. Instructively, what a society accepts as literature has its best expression in the language of the society. As Isola stated in an interview with Akintunde Akinyemi in 2006, "The first of the duties of a writer, therefore, is to cater to that particular language—the mother tongue [...] Therefore, it is only through language that literature can rejuvenate, regenerate, organize, and set things right in the culture. If you are English or Japanese, it is the language that you speak that would determine what sort of literature you will write and in what language to write it. Only the mother tongue can tell you what to do and how to do it correctly. Therefore, when people ask me why I write in my mother tongue, then, they are wondering and ignoring the most essential aspect of the duty of literature which is to serve the immediate society. If I write in English, I will be serving a very small part of the society, the elites." (Falola and Akinyemi 2008: 429).

Further evidence of Isola's linguistic commitment to Yoruba also comes from his own statement shared in another interview with the American journalist, Lee Nichols earlier in 1974. In response to the question of what he

considered the importance of writing in African languages to be in the context of African literature as a whole, Isola provided the following pertinent response,

first is that if one wants to get African thoughts, African culture, the African way of thinking across. I think it is best done in African languages. You know their language is the vehicle of culture. If you remove language, most of the things that one treasures in the cultures of the world will be half removed. If the works are available in the original languages then you may be able to try a translation. But the more literature you have in African languages the more other people will want to study these languages to see the treasure you have in the literature of these (African) languages. (Nichols, 1981: 59-60).

This forty-six year old statement is perhaps the greatest argument for literature written in African languages. It is also enthusiastically a worthy testament for our goal of submitting Akinwumi Isola, creative writer, literary critic, and language sentinel as an extraordinary model for Yoruba language promotion (*ìgbélarugẹ èdè*).

Following Isola's death on February 17, 2018, Toyin Falola, distinguished African historian made the following declaration in a tribute, "Ìṣọla was a deep-seated practitioner of the language, and he was never apologetic about narrowing his audience to just Yoruba people. By staying within the particular, he made Yoruba universal. He has greatly contributed to Yoruba language, social and visual culture, documentation, and history. He relentlessly campaigned for the Yoruba language to play a more visible role in our social life so that the culture, the history, and the beauty they harbor would not disappear."

### Conclusion

On Wednesday, March 20, 2013 at 2 pm, a truly historic event, within Nigerian university system, took place at Adekunle Ajasin University, Nigeria. This event ultimately highlights our argument that Isola was indeed paramount model for Yoruba language promotion. On this day, Akinwumi Isola delivered a Convocation Lecture in Yoruba language. This was a momentous event and vibrant proof that engagement of African languages for intellectual discourse and academic presentation is possible. It was also a testimony of Isola's long-time commitment to development and use of Yoruba language (splendor) for the betterment of the Yoruba people and society (fairness). A significant caveat is that his former university (Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), nee University of Ife, Ile Ife) where he retired had turned down his request to give

such a lecture in Yoruba noting that *it is not a practice* for such lectures. The response from OAU highlights what newspaper columnist, Adeolu Ademoyo identified as the ‘lack of agency amongst Yoruba elites to address the linguistic disenfranchisement of the Yoruba masses’ (*Premium Times*, March 31, 2013).

In conclusion, African literature scholarship cannot continue to pay exclusive attention to literatures written in European languages while ignoring those written in African languages. African literary scholars should take the leadership in this matter and set the pace by revisiting literary compositions in their mother tongues and by establishing themselves as the foremost authority in the same way that English critics and scholars have established themselves as foremost authorities in the scholarship of English literature. It is challenging to imagine the African writer today making a significant contribution to asserting the African people’s cultural identity without having recourse to African languages. In fact, language is the only feature that presently gives African societies their cultural identity.

Nevertheless, writing in indigenous languages alone is not enough in order for use of the African languages to be meaningful. African writers writing in these languages must extend their interest areas outside realm of literary creations. These areas include the struggle to give indigenous African languages a respectable standing in national ideological systems such as education. The writers also need to assist in promoting efforts to provide literary skills to still illiterate masses of their individual countries. What use is it to write in Bambara, Gikuyu, Hausa, Swahili, or Yorùbá when majority of the audience the writer needs to address cannot read? We must follow the model provided by Akinwumi Isola in the promotion of Yoruba and other African languages. We must continue to study Yoruba language (its structure), use it in our writing (academic and non-academic), teach it to both first language and foreign language learners, and do all the best we can to promote the language.

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