How Many Languages Are There / In How Many Languages Is There Literature in: Africa[1]

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Abstract:

The question posed in the title is much more difficult to answer than the various lists on the Internet suggest. A good example of this is the dispute that arose between the author of this article and an English teacher (Mária Béres) a few years ago (by the way, she gave information about the world-famous Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, more specifically about the number of languages in Nigeria).

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Basic Data

Following the large collections created in the 1960s and 1990s (which also include reviews and figures from various literary lexicons), it seems as if the efforts in this direction, i.e., to take stock of African literatures and their languages, have run out. Part of the reason for this is that, despite all attempts, experiments, and calculations, an accurate picture of Africa's linguistic situation could not and cannot be obtained. The other is that they realised that there is no point in striving for such data-likeness after all. It is much more important to follow the attempts in specific African languages, occasionally, one by one (by author), observing a given cultural milieu (or country or ethnic group).

In addition, in terms of numbers, we can get an idea of the languages of the world from the *Ethnologue* internet database, which I was once confronted with, whose information bases were previously freely accessible. More recently, they can only be used with a subscription. So we now had to look up the detailed data from other sources. In addition, the *Ethnologue* website now includes the following basic data: the number of languages in Africa: 2144, the number of the related population: 887 million. For comparison: Number of languages in Asia: 2,294, related population: approx. 4 billion. In other words, for a given population, there are more than four times as many languages in Africa as in Asia.

Add to this that this wealth of languages is not evenly distributed on the continent. For example, while in Nigeria there are more than 500, in Congo there are approx. 300, but more than 100 languages have also been registered in Tanzania or Congo. On the other hand, in Rwanda or Burundi, the three ethnicities of quite different characters speak one language. Thus, the common language of the Hamite pastoral people of uncertain origin (perhaps immigrated from the southeast, from Ethiopia), the *Tutsis*, the majority Bantu *Hutus*, and the settled, small number of pygmy *Twas* was unified as *Kinyarwanda*, and in a similar structure, although with modified names, the same is the case in Burundi and even in Eastern Uganda (see the *Bahima* and *Bairu*, Hamita pastoralist and Bantu agricultural linguistic community in the former kingdom of Ankole).

The situation is further complicated when we consider that, although we have to accept as a fact the figure of more than 2,000 for African languages, the number of Bantu languages, which are believed to have radiated from the area of present-day Cameroon (although there are several theories about this), is about 370 according to István Fodor's excellent book and database (A *bantu nyelvek*, 2007), although other information shows that there may be more. See, for example, the huge enterprise edited by Mark van de Velde et al. (2019), which sheds light on the complexity of the situation. According to the introduction of the authors/editors: in terms of Bantu languages, there are 440 in Guthrie's classic work (1971), about 680 in Mann and Dalby's (1987), Bastin et al. (1999) mentions 542, in Maho's bibliography first (2003) 660, later in his

expanded edition (2009) 950 language variations are distinguished. The volume itself, on the other hand, lists and briefly describes 555 languages in its database (see page 3).

At the same time, these large numbers, which are significantly different from each other, shed light on the question that, since they are languages with the same root, it would be necessary, most of them having yet to be done, to catalogue them and to distinguish between them as separate languages or just dialects. Let's think about the fact that the least understandable Hungarian dialect is probably Csángó, but is it a dialect or an independent language? From his former trips to Vienna and Berlin, my grandfather brought home the knowledge that there are mutual words that are not understood in the other place. An even more sensitive example: we know that they speak English in Australia. My friends in London, on the other hand, claim that they do not (or hardly) understand the language of the distant big island / continent.

And an African example: decades ago, I became good friends with two married couples who came to study in Hungary from what was then only one large country, Sudan (the husbands studied with us). In their mother tongue (Shilluk), I tried to collect folklore texts (some tales and songs have been lying unpublished on one of my bookshelves ever since). We transcribed the texts collected from the wife of Joseph Bol Chan (later the president of the Senate of South Sudan for a while) with the help of Peter Adwok (later the minister of higher education of South Sudan), who came to us later, in the original language, then into English and Hungarian we translated it. In the case of one of the texts, regarding the name of the *grass skirt*, Peter exclaimed: "It's a Nuer word, but I understand it." Then I immediately asked him how well the Siluk and Nuer people understand each other: he said that he thinks at least 80 percent of the vocabulary is the same!!! In other words, in the literature between these two completely separate languages, could not only similarity, but identity be so great?

One more fact that confuses the cataloguing: to this day, George Peter Murdock gives a picture of the African peoples in a systematic form (divided into 53 groups) in his handbook (1959). At the end of this work there is a folk list, which includes approx. 6000 names. Undoubtedly, it also contains versions of some folk names. In addition, the figure suggests that there are bigger questions than we expected when we started looking for African languages. In particular, if (taking Murdock's book, among others, into account) we leave the scope of a strictly linguistic approach, and we also take into account the presence of different peoples and ethnic groups (also a large number) behind languages.

Case Study: Nigeria

In my previous article, I dared say that there are no more than 150 significant languages in Nigeria. Said teacher schooled me thoroughly that according to *Ethnologue* there are 528 languages in this large and diverse country, although the international database also

counted approx. 20 extinct languages, and if we looked carefully at the knowledge material provided by the data collection, it also includes dozens of languages that, according to the listed data, have a few dozen speakers, that is, we were dealing with languages on the verge of extinction.

At the same time, it was a peculiar contradiction for me that the various collections floating on the internet (e.g. Nairaland) mentioned 250 ethnic groups. In other words, in this case, each ethnic group (must have) had two or possibly more mother tongues?! More information: Rudolf Leger, professor emeritus of the African languages department of the University of Frankfurt, who has visited Hungary several times (I myself have visited his city several times) as part of the interuniversity cooperation under the Erasmus Programme, stated that, as one of the European experts of the Fulani language, he really there may be about 400 languages in Nigeria.

Since I became more and more interested in the problem, I managed to find an excellent summary, Renate Wente-Lukas's book (1985), which even though is not based on the existence of languages but of ethnicities, the database of this volume provides extraordinary lessons. If I am not mistaken when counting the data (since it is not numbered), the German researcher takes into account more than 500 ethnic groups. I must emphasise that it always characterises the language of each ethnic group, and provides the data of the publication serving as a source, which is mostly a linguistic description (as well).

But this is where the surprise begins. On the one hand, if we also pay attention to the data of the subgroups indicated in the given article, the number of ethnic groups increases to at least four times the given number. At the same time, for many groups, we recognise the main populations of other West African countries. Such is e.g. the *Zarma*, which is a tribe related to the *Songhai* of Mali and Niger, and whose oral traditions and heroic epics are now widely known (there are apparently scattered diasporas in Nigeria, reducing of course the total real number of Nigerian languages). But let me mention some more examples to characterise the contradictions. The listing of the *Jukun* and *Jukunoid* peoples forms a separate group (although they presumably speak the same language). In many places, two types of names of the given ethnic group appear side by side (e.g. *Akbet – Ehom*, or *Akweya – Yachi*, etc.).

The most notable example of a separate language or dialect problem, however, is the following: "*izi – ezaa – ikwo – mgbo…* See Igbo. The izi–ezaa–ikwo–mgbo cluster, often regarded as a dialect of Igbo, is treated separately on purely linguistic grounds, although closely related to the Igbo language cluster" (Wente-Lukas 1985, p. 185.). In addition, we are aware that the Igbo (pronounced: "ibo") people and language, which now number 40 million and are divided into more than 10 dialects, including at least 13 *Igboid* language groups, are beginning to be assimilated by languages with a larger number of speakers, such as *Efik*, *Ibibio* or *Ijaw* are also spoken in the Niger Delta region.

But I cannot help but cite my own ethnological / folkloristic insights here. In his study of Nigerian Yoruba *praise poetry* (1974), Bolanle Awe presents three different types of examples in his remarkable analysis. The text cited as a description of the *Oriki Orile* type praises Oni-koyi, one of the chiefs of the Ikoyi area, who is one of the descendants of the families that played a role in the ancient Oyo Empire in the first decades of the 19th century. According to tradition, he was given tasks in the political and military administration of the kingdom. The text does not seem to say much to the non-expert:

1. As long as the Sun Bird remains a wandering bird, / Olukoyi cannot cease to be in battle. /

2. Iyeke Igede, Gbon-n-kaa's offspring. /

3. If the enemy surprised them in an open forest landscape, /

4. They transformed themselves into a forest tree. /

5. If the enemy surprised you in the savanna region, /

6. You turned yourselves into savanna grass. /

7. And if you were surprised by the enemy in a deserted land full of anthills, /

8. You turned into an anthill fungus. /

9. You are known as someone who only sometimes stays at home, /

10. Sometimes you live in an open forest, /

11. Sometimes in a "forested area", /

12. Sometimes on the streets, /

13. Sometimes on a farm, /

14. Sometimes in Aawe, /

15. Sometimes in Aagba, /

16. Sometimes in Kobai, /

17. Sometimes in Ogbomosho, /

18. Sometimes in Ile Ifon, /

19. And sometimes in Kuta.

However, Awe points out that the image of the Onikoyi family emerges from it; whose members were famous and restless soldiers and members of the respected Eso order, the most outstanding soldiers of the Oyo army. But in the eulogy, we also get a

glimpse into the fighting strategy of Onikoyi himself, who was able to hide in many places, which made it difficult for the enemy to trap them easily. Second, listing all the caches gives some information about the historical geography of the area, which has seen many changes, especially in the 19th century. Because people who earn onikoyi oroki can be found in places as far away as Ibadan, Oyo, Ogbomosho, or the city of Ikere. Other traditions clearly indicate that many people fled Ikoyi after the Fulanis destroyed the city at the beginning of the 19th century. The frequency of occurrence of their oriki shows the extent of their dispersion.

All of this also meant that the Yoruba dialect spoken by the people of the city was dispersed, and over the course of centuries new dialects of a diasporic nature were born from them in new places, or when their own city was founded, languages with independent changes arose (which were presumably registered in the databases as independent languages). And this short case study aims to show that additional entanglements in determining the number of African languages prevent us from finding the key to the solution.

Origin, Exploration, Kinship, and Unification Process of African Languages

The origin of African languages is a very controversial issue. The beginning of the migration of the Bantu peoples (and with it the start of the spread of languages) has been dated as recently as in the millennia BC. We can find an even more specific case around the language of the indigenous people of Africa, the *Sans* (better known as Bushmen), who are considered a unique phenomenon. It has long been known that the artists of the South African petroglyphs, which are at least 2-3,000 years old, were ancestors of the *Sans*.

According to the hypothesis, they once formed a much more significant and organised society than today's fishermen-hunters-gatherer **Stone Age population** fleeing from the immigrating Bantu tribes, scattered in the Kalahari desert, in large family-ethnic groups of 20-120 people, with a very rudimentary material culture. In addition, recent genetic studies have shown that their origin can be traced back to more than 100,000 years ago. And they have a special language, which contains 8 clicking sounds, and which can only be learned correctly in childhood, formed from the stomach, probably the result of tens of thousands of years of slow development and transformation.

As for today's rich knowledge of African languages, this is certainly due to the much-maligned proselytising missionaries, who learned and then wrote down many, many African languages in order to translate the Bible into that language. But most of them later started to collect the local oral forms and even folk customs.

Perhaps the most famous example of this is the case of the Belgian missionary Gustaaf Hulstaert (see my correspondence interview with him: *Egyháztörténeti Szemle*,

2019, issue 4), who essentially lived his life in the Congo. He not only became a proselytiser of the Mungo-Nkundo people, an ethnic group of perhaps 12-15 million people, but also recorded the very rich folk traditions of this group, which has now become a nation. The magnitude of his work is shown by the huge bibliography of his works and his numerous monographs. Leaving the work on notable heroic epics to his religious colleagues, he published 5 full-length collections of fairy tales, a collection of proverbs containing 2,670 examples, greeting formulas (*losako*), and two huge volumes containing folk songs, as well as in hundreds of studies, he reported on the social image, material, and spiritual culture of the people.

In addition, he published the grammar of the Mongo-Nkundo language in three substantial volumes and published the large dictionary of this Congolese group in two volumes. And in cooperation with local colleagues who had been raised to be literate, he translated the Bible, moreover, the songs and hymns in the style of Mongo lyrical folk poetry. And with this, he created perhaps the best African Bible translation. Father Hulstaert also stood up for the interests of his chosen people during difficult times and successfully defended the Mongo's right to land against the Belgian colonial authorities.

It is worth quoting one of his thoughts, in his opinion, what today's scribes owe to the rich African oral culture that still exists:

"In my opinion, we should create monographs on all cultural sectors of all African traditional communities, regardless of the political course of the moment, in order to preserve this multifaceted cultural miracle for future generations of all mankind."

As for the discovery of the kinship of languages, in this regard, I believe that despite the existing classification of Greenberg (*Languages of Africa*, 1963; the Hungarian István Fodor discovered its pitfalls, resulting in a huge international debate), we are still at the beginning. After all, a sufficiently high-quality description of a large number of African languages has not been completed (Wente-Lukas also tries to paint a picture of certain Nigerian languages based on only fragmentary journal publications in many cases). There was a fashion wave in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, when students from Western universities traveled en masse to Africa for a few months to prepare their PhDs in order to collect data on an African language.

But in the opinion of German linguist colleagues, the dissertations made from these are of extremely uneven quality: at best, they only describe a few thousand words and the most obvious grammatical rules. In fact, they are not suitable for comparative work. And the fashion wave blew out in the nineties. In addition, as we have already mentioned above, the unification of related languages is of course still ongoing (see especially the previously mentioned information about the *Igbo* language).

Literature in African Languages

As far as the literatures born in African languages are concerned, their magnitude certainly corresponds to that, as shown by the summation experiments that produced lexicons in the seventies and eighties. Their number was probably between 120 and 150 then. Today, this number is believed to have increased significantly.

The number of languages in which folklore texts have been collected and published (mostly in bilingual form) is probably much larger than this. Fortunately, there are now a large number of locally born African folklorists active in this area.

Regarding literature in African languages, here we can only take a look at the most important groups of phenomena. Significant and early writing and written literature from the 18th century are associated with the *Fulani* (Fula, Fulbe, Ful, Peul) people, who now live in 19 mostly francophone West African countries (just as a counterexample to African multilingualism). Before the invasion of the whites, the former authors recorded their works in the *Ayami* script adapted from Arabic. In a similar way, the early writing of the Nigerian *Hausa*s, who now number well over fifty million, exists, in which a historical narrative (royal cronicle) and epics, which were saved early on from orality to writing, have also survived.

The *Yoruba* and *Igbo*, also in Nigeria, now have a rich literacy in their native language. On the one hand, these publications contain the historical memories of traditionalists, but in an almost unique way in Africa, the production of canvas novels (even in the *Hausa* language) is huge. Among the Igbos, the name of the genre is *Onitsha* market literature (from the name of the town that publishes the publications).

The other group of phenomena that deserves attention is the literature written in the native language of the South African Bantu peoples (*Zulu*, *Kosa*, *Sotho*, *Tshwane*, etc.), which was created in connection with the operation of the missions settled there, e.g. Thomas Mofolo's key novel, originally written in Sotho, is about the Zulu king Shaka, who is also referred to as the African Napoleon, due to the wars of conquest fought amid great cruelty, and in connection with the creation of a unified Zululand. The Hungarian Tibor Keszthelyi called the decades from the 19th century to the 1930s the Bantu Golden Age, which produced numerous literary works and professional works (unfortunately, most of them are still not available in European languages).

Swahili literature, which begins with a voluminous epic written in the middle of the 18th century and culminates with the work of an outstanding 20th-century writer, Shaaban Robert, among many others, is undoubtedly the most significant stage of writing in African languages (see later).

As for the former lexicons, there are two encyclopedic compilations marked by the name of the German Africanist literary scholar Janheinz Jahn, published one year apart (1971 and 1972, respectively, which are preceded by a data collection that also

includes material on American black and Caribbean literature, 1965), in the first there are about 7-800 authors (writers, poets, playwrights, critics), totalling approx. 2,200 works. In terms of their language use, English naturally dominates, followed by French, followed by Portuguese, and we can even find authors writing in German and Spanish. As far as African languages are concerned, we can learn about fifty languages in which literature has already been created, although it is not clear from the compilation whether they are only collections of church books or folkloric texts, or whether literary works were also created in them.

The first volume also includes Arabic works born in the sub-Saharan region, the latter does not, although it turns out this time too that we should not sway ourselves in the belief that the Arabic language is a unified, single language. There are significant differences between Egyptian and Sudanese Arabic or Sukrian Arabic, which took root in Africa as a result of the long Turkish rule. There are at least six Arabic dialects in Sudan. Even then (before 1972), the languages that excelled in several works include: the Ghanaian Eve and Chi (Akvapem, Asanti), the Nigerian Yoruba and Igbo, the Ugandan Ganda, Malagasy from Madagascar, as well as the South African Bantu Bemba, Ndebele, Nyanja, Sona, Northern and Southern Sotho, Tshwane, Venda, Kosa and Zulu. And, of course, East African Swahili, which currently has around 120 million speakers. The fact that these data collections were not complete even then can be seen simply from the fact that a total of three Swahili works are listed in them, while from the middle of the 18th century to the seventies, at least fifty Swahili epics with authors were born or became known, primarily singing the events of Islamic history, which are completely absent from both volumes.

Let us note that the rapid literary development of the southern Bantu languages blossomed out of the extraordinary situation that the tools of writing were born in the last decades of the 19th century, as a result of the activities of numerous Catholic and Reformed missions that settled in the area and undertook book publishing. the local scribes flourished, and thus the first great wave of literature in African languages was created, which, as already mentioned, is also called the Bantu Golden Age. While these missions created not only a rich prose and poetic literature, but also a series of local newspapers and a wide range of professional (religious and practical, ethnographic, and historical) book publications in the listed languages.

It is interesting that in the American enterprise published seven years later (Herdeck 1979) there are fewer, only approx. six to seven hundred authors listed, although the editor provided the volume with numerous indexes, distinguishing 39 African languages along with European languages: he lists 219 novelists, 292 poets, 149 critics, 106 playwrights, 77 journalists, 43 autobiographers (the contradictory numbers they clearly follow from the fact that some authors cultivated several genres).

These former manual lexicons were, of course, already surrounded by sub-experiments at the time of their creation, by enterprises aiming to summarise the

literature of a particular country or larger ethnic group. In some cases, provided with sufficient data, in other cases only undertaking an aesthetic analysis of the works of the given authors. Of course, other lexical enterprises were also born. However, these are more conscious selections, directing attention to the most prominent ones. Thus, Hans M. Zell and his colleagues, who later formed the excellent independent so-called reference publishing house, published a reader's guide (1983), which includes about 80-100 short biographies and a few hundred art reviews with short reviews in English, French, and Portuguese, broken down by country and including children's literature in a separate group. In the same year, a French lexical database edited by Ambroise Kom was published (1983), which, in turn, directly includes descriptions of a few hundred African literary works in French. Years later, a two-volume version of this, expanded to more than double, was published, even before the death of the great Canadian mentor of African literature, Mr. Antoine Naaman (who once sent us many publications), but unfortunately the author of this article could not get hold of it. The Handbook (1999) edited by Douglas Killam and Ruth Rowe contains many hundreds of short biographies together with even shorter art descriptions, but in this volume the aspect of selection prevailed when processing the increasingly rich African literature, and conceptual articles (e.g. Anglo-Boer War, West-African literature, Southern Sotho language, etc.) were also included.

The influence of Jahnheinz Jahn, who passed away early, is shown by the fact that the main library of Guntenberg University in Mainz, which preserves his memory and bears the name of Jahn, has about one hundred and fifty African folk names listed on its website, for which a written record covering church books, practical technical books and folklore collections certainly exists, but more significant literature or at least initial literary endeavors can also be seen in most of them (the list is filtered and supplemented, and of course it is far from complete):

Acholi, Adangme, Afrikaans, Akan, Akuapem-Twi, Amharic, Angolan, Asante-Twi, Bambara, Bemba, Bini, Bulu, Calabar, Creole (Guinea-Bissau Creole), Creole (Krio, Sierra Leone), Criol / Crioulo (Cape Verde), Cheva, Tshwane, Dangme, Dawida, Dinka, Edo, Efik, Northern Sotho, Eve, Fang, Fante, Fon, Fulani (Ful, Fula, Peul), Fulfulde, Gã, Ganda, Gbaya, Gen, Gĩkũyũ, Guinea-Bissau Creole, Guingbé, Hausa, Herero, Ibibio, Idoma, Ig-Bo, Yoruba, Kaboverdianu, Kalenjin, Kamba, Kanuri, Kaonde, Kereve, Kimbundu, Kinyarwanda, Kirundi, Kiswahili, Kosa, Congo, Creole, Creole Kriol, Krobo, Kwanyama, Lenje, Lingala, Lozi, Lunda, Luba, Luyia, Lunda, Luo, Luvale, Manding, Malgas, Maasai, Mauritian Creole, Mbukushu, Mbundu, Mongo-nkundo, Morisien, Mwanga, Nama, Ndebele, Ndonga, Nuer , Nyanja, Nyoro-Tooro, Nzema, Oromo (or Galla), Ovambo, Ovimbundu, Pedi (or Southern Sotho), Rundi, Sotho (Northern), Sona, Shilluk, Serer, Siswati, Somali, Songhai, Soninke, Swahili, Swazi, Taita, Tsonga, Tem, Tigrinya, Tiv, Tonga, Tuba, Tumbuka, Venda, Wolof, Zulu.

To date, the most complete starting point for learning about literature in African languages is the landmark work of the Belgian scholar Albert S. Gérard (1920–1996) (1981), in which, in addition to literature in living Bantu or other sub-Saharan languages, we also get an idea of writings born in historical languages (*Axumite Kor*, *Ge'ez*, *Amharic*, late medieval *Arabic*, *Hausa*, old literatures preserved with the *Ayami* script such as *Hausa*, *Fulani*, *Wolof* and *Malgas*, etc.).

Literary Works in African or European Languages? – The Problem of the Target Audience

For decades, the biggest question mark in the life of African literature has been: who is it for, which audience, who is it being prepared for, who does it want to address. After all, the vast majority of the continent's 1.3 billion inhabitants do not understand European languages. Novels, poems (or pulps) in English, French, or Portuguese can only be read by the educated and literate class, and in the best case this is not more than 20-30 percent of the population of the given country, but in many cases much less.

In this regard, it is worth taking a moment to look at the data that the francophone player living in Pécs, Tibor Kun, collected on one occasion about how many people know the French language in which French-speaking African countries. According to his summary, based on data from 1989, only 12.5 million French speakers in Africa at that time were considered full-fledged francophones, and approx. another 20 million spoke French occasionally (for a total population of at least 200-250 million). But already then the process started, as a result of which schools taught more and more in local languages, while the illiteracy rate was 50-85 percent (these figures have obviously changed significantly nowadays).

Still, with this mirror in front of them, African writers have been fighting for decades whether to choose European languages leading to world literature as the basic medium of their works, or whether they should serve their own people with their art. The issue was debated during conferences, and in practice, there were many similar experiments. We would like to outline a few cases here.

Undoubtedly, the ethnic groups living in Nigeria, with a population of more than 200 million, are in the best position today, as urbanisation has progressed in most places, and millions live in an environment where knowledge of the English language is almost a prerequisite. It is therefore no coincidence that writers such as the Nobel laureate Yoruba Wole Soyinka choose a European language as the basic medium of their works. And in a less open, self-confessed form, he chose/is choosing the same path as his fellow countryman, the Igbo Chinua Achebe, creating a kind of African English, in which he weaves elements of Yoruba traditions, imagery and myths, often causing

puzzlement for his readers and viewers of his stage works, even if the elemental effect of his works ensures his success.

Chinua Achebe, who is of Igbo origin and world famous like Soyinka, who also chose English, speaks directly about the Igboisation of English, while Soyinka even undertook, one might say, going the opposite way, to present to the world a great novel saturated with folklore elements, with a fabulous-mythical character, translated from Yoruba into English. The most peculiar Nigerian phenomenon is the so-called the long-standing popularity of *Onitsha market literature*, which is essentially a kind of canvas literature in pidginized English. Light literature as a genre spread from this Igbo town in the 1960s and can now be found in many African countries.

We do not have adequate knowledge, but according to our impressions, the classic, 18-19th century literature with Islamic roots in the now more than fifty million *Hausa*s community in Nigeria, or among the *Fulani*s, who are scattered in 19 West African countries, but also have a significant population of about 40 million. Before the Europeans, these literatures were written in *Ayami* script adapted from the Arabic script. Today, Latin script is used. Orality is still a defining element of their community life, so the Fulani have the richest epic tradition in West Africa, which has now been published in dozens of publications, namely in the spirit of the fact that in Africa folklore is considered part of literature.

And if the concept of classical African literature has already been mentioned, we cannot refrain from mentioning the library, which is enriched day by day as a result of continuous excavations, whose shelves are filled with the written messages of the nearly three-thousand-year-old ancient Egyptian culture (in addition to practical records of cultural historical value, various stories, narratives, fragmentary novels, poems, hymns, farewells reminiscent of the Book of the Dead, etc.), are filled with their translations. In the same way, we cannot forget Ethiopian literature (*Axumite* 330-900 and post-Axumite Christian 1200-1672 as well as modern Christian 16-18th century literature written in *Ge'ez* and *Amharic* respectively), which not only contain religious books, but also hagiographic they also contain works containing literature (life histories of saints), and even a work revealing the origin story of the *Oromo*s (also known as *Gallas*) from the beginning of the last era has been preserved. The richness of the ancient written literature that is waiting to be discovered is shown by the fact that in West Africa there are reports of about 300,000 manuscripts, mainly in Arabic, but also in other African languages, and in Ethiopia the number of scrolls hidden in various monasteries or families is estimated at 250,000. About 30,000 manuscripts are preserved in the Ahmed Baba Institute and Library in Timbuktu, a famous city in Mali. (Also, in connection with old or older African literature, one should also take into account the *experimental* African writing systems on which records have survived here and there, but this can be the subject of another study.)

If we examine the use of languages and literature in Africa, we cannot forget Arabic, which is otherwise dominant in North Africa. Never forgetting the debate (in 1984 at the second international conference of the ELTE African Research Programme directed by the former and current author), which took place between a francophone Africanist researcher and Egyptians, and the most vehemently disputing Tunisian Africanist, Abderrahman Ayoub, the notable researcher of the famous Hilali epic that spanned the entire Arab world, who demanded with no small offense that the literature of North Africa be considered part of the culture of the African continent. But now I would like to briefly explore the special situation of Nagib Mahfuz, the Nobel Prize-winning Egyptian writer-prodigy, who lived to be a hundred years old. This artist who reached a very old age and left behind a very rich literary heritage, who lived his last years in a very difficult physical condition due to an assassination attempt against him (he could only dictate), did not create his works in the Middle Arabic Egyptian television language, which made the means of communication of a populous country that thrives on program production in all other Arabic-speaking countries as well, so to speak, even though in the latter in many cases they speak completely different dialects, significantly different from Egyptian – but in the language of the people of the streets of Cairo. This, despite the fact that Mahfuz's works are extremely popular, certainly hides linguistic difficulties for readers who speak and know the dialects of, say, Moroccan, Tunisian, Algerian or even Middle Eastern countries. But this is likely to cause problems for otherwise well-prepared translators in the case of translation into any other language. However, the different situation of Mahfuz from other African writers lies on the one hand in the much larger number of possible readers (Egypt's population has now exceeded 150 million), and on the other hand in the much more advanced literacy of the Arab countries.

The key novel of the Bantu Golden Age is Thomas Mofolo's novel Shaka, the story of which can be said to be dramatic in itself, since its publication was withheld for a long time by the otherwise well-intentioned missionaries for a long time (they had a hard time coping with the cruelty-filled life story of the nation-founding tribal king, nicknamed the Zulu Napoleon), but its language path also shows specific features. Mofolo probably went on a study trip to Zululand before he wrote his novel, as he was Sotho, since the work, originally written in Sotho, contains not only authentic historical moments, but also quotes from the Zulu king's famous oral praise song. The novel, albeit with a long delay, was only later translated into English, and only then was the Zulu translation completed, giving the opportunity for the work to reach the circle of those about whom it is written, who once experienced or could have heard directly from their ancestors about the *mfecane* (multi-meaning expression: crushing, dispersion, forced dispersal, forced migration) about the period of Zulu conquests punctuated by many cruel wars and led by King Shaka, after which the unified Zulu nation was born.

Shaaban Robert's fate can be related to Mahfuz's from a linguistic point of view, since Swahili, the language of the East African coast, is now spoken by an estimated 120

million people in at least four or five countries. In addition, hundreds of years of cultural traditions serve as a background for the population of the area known as the Swahili zone. The Bantu-based language, although heavily influenced by Arabic, has at least 400 years of writing. The year of creation of the first heroic epic: 1728 (genre name: utenzi, title of the epic: Bwana Mwengo), to which the author himself refers in the text.

But as far as the oeuvre of the famous Tanzanian artist is concerned, the only Hungarian summary of Shabaan Robert (1909–1962) comes from the hand of Géza Füssi Nagy (The oeuvre of Shaaban Robert in Swahili literature, *Helikon*, 1986, 3–4, pp. 359–376). In it, we get an idea of his life path and his main works, among which his autobiographically inspired work titled My Life (Maisha yangu, 1949) appears first, while he writes poems in classical Swahili measures. We have to mention here his three notable novels that form a trilogy (*Adili na mduguze*/Adile and his siblings, 1952, *Kusadikika*/The land of faith, 1951, *Kufikirika*/The land of consciousness, 1967), which, like his entire oeuvre, are still highly respected, known and widely read. Several other important novels should be mentioned here. His biography includes a total of 178 independent prose works, stories, essays, studies, novels, quite a few epics, and a large number of lyrical poems, and several verse anthologies. Although, let us add, perceiving the flow of newer and newer Swahili works, this oeuvre reminiscent of Hungarian Mór Jókai's widespread influence in Hungary is already embedded in the historical dimension of modern Swahili-language literature, since the author's popularity is still unbroken.

Our last examples are several times peculiar, since André Brink, who works in a European language adapted to Africa, in Afrikaans, which evolved from Dutch, later translates his works written in his mother tongue into English himself, like the Kenyan Kikuyu Ngugi. The Kenyan prose writer James Ngugi wa Thiong'o, known for his several novels translated into Hungarian, recently wrote two novels in his native Kikuyu language, in addition to several children's books in his native language, and then translated them into English. But here we can face the situation and role of essentially English-speaking white African writers. Nadine Gordimer, Doris Lessing, or Maxwell Coetzee, some of whom are connected to or from South Africa and have appeared on the scene, or let us add Wilbur Smith, born in Zambia, who cultivates a popular genre, who in today's Africa are already, to put it mildly, treated with aloofness, and some critics do not directly consider them African writers. Interestingly, however, this distance did not develop in relation to Angolan-Mozambican Portuguese writers who have become world famous today, such as Mia Couto or Eduardo Agualusa, who already have Hungarian translations. At the same time, and this would also be worth a separate analysis in order to find out the reasons, we do not know any white writers from Francophone Africa (except perhaps the Algerian-born Albert Camus)!

Summarising what has been said, we see that the African language Babel will certainly create many more special situations similar to or even different from those mentioned in the field of language use, the application or Africanisation of languages. On the other hand, it can be predicted that the African literary output will continue to

be offered in the world selection in European languages. On the other hand, their national role will be strengthened primarily in African languages, the background of which is the literacy of the relatively larger populations, the spread of literacy among them, one might say, becomes almost complete, and the mother tongue will therefore play a greater role in their community life. Some African languages, above all Swahili and Arabic, are expected to make a strong literary breakthrough. Finally, let us mention that, according to African literary analysts who pay close attention to Afrocentrism, Arabic is also considered a *colonising language* in the continent's cultural bloodstream.

Question Marks

In conclusion, the author of this summary would like to draw the future reader's attention to the fact that he is not a linguist but an ethnologist, a folklorist, and a writer. In other words, he acquired his knowledge primarily not on the basis of linguistic works, but rather on the basis of general orientation, drawing from ethnographic / ethnological / cultural anthropological and literary literature. Presumably, István Fodor (1920-2012) or Géza Nagy Füssi (1946-2008), who were prominent Africanist linguists in our country, could have come forward with more professional work on this topic, but unfortunately, as can be seen from the year numbers, both have already passed away. To the best of our knowledge, there are two Swahili linguists in Hungary today, Attila T. Horváth, who, on the other hand, works in another field as an employee of the University of Technology's library, so he is considered (almost) a dropout. On the other hand, Zoltán Szombathy, who, on the other hand, is the saviour of our field of science, recently defended his doctoral dissertation (Islam in Black Africa), but who divides his research attention between Arabic studies, Islam studies, and African studies.

Unfortunately, today in Hungary, where the number of taught disciplines has just decreased as a result of the Bologna process – in stark contrast to western universities with the opposite expanding themes – it is not even possible to obtain a bachelor's degree in African linguistics. We can only hope that some enterprising young people will make it to Western universities (see: Frankfurt, Leiden, Paris, London, Bloomington, or Evanston, as well as many other prominent and extensive foreign higher education institutions with African studies education), and precisely in this country, obtains a qualification in the field.

And finally, as far as our topic is concerned: (1) we can only give an approximate picture of African languages and their number, based on estimates, even if the order of magnitude is clearly visible; (2) as for the process of becoming a literary language, it is not easy to keep track of it, because on the one hand, it also happens recently that new literary experiments are created, for which an African language that is not yet in use serves as the basic medium, but even if they are worth local publication, they mostly do

not make it (at least for the time being) to European libraries, and thus there is no way to learn about them.

Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on Contributor

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