

The Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures

We writers and scholars from all regions of Africa gathered in Asmara, Eritrea from January 11 to 17, 2000 at the conference titled *Against All Odds: African Languages and Literatures into the 21st Century*. This is the first conference on African languages and literatures ever to be held on African soil, with participants from East, West, North, Southern Africa and from the diaspora and by writers and scholars from around the world. We examined the state of African languages in literature, scholarship, publishing, education and administration in Africa and throughout the world. We celebrated the vitality of African languages and literatures and affirmed their potential. We noted with pride that despite all the odds against them, African languages as vehicles of communication and knowledge survive and have a written continuity of thousands of years. Colonialism and neocolonialism created some of the most serious obstacles against African languages and literatures. We noted with concern the fact that these obstacles still haunt Africa and continue to block the mind of the continent. We identified a profound incongruity in colonial languages speaking for the continent. At the start of a new century and millennium, Africa must firmly reject this incongruity and affirm a new beginning by returning to its languages and heritage. Therefore, the question of culture, literatures and languages cannot be separated from the economic problems of African countries created by colonial and neocolonial forces and their local allies. Decolonization of the African mind should go hand in hand with decolonization of the economy and politics.

At this historic conference, we writers and scholars from all regions of Africa gathered in Asmara, Eritrea declare that:

1. African languages must take on the duty, the responsibility and the challenge of speaking for the continent.
2. The vitality and equality of African languages must be recognized as a basis for the future empowerment of African peoples.
3. The diversity of African languages reflects the rich cultural heritage of Africa and must be used as an instrument of African unity.
4. Dialogue among African languages is essential: African languages must use the instrument of translation to advance communication among all people, including the disabled.
5. All African children have the unalienable right to attend school and learn in their mother tongues. Every effort should be made to develop African languages at all levels of education.
6. Promoting research on African languages is vital for their development, while the advancement of African research and documentation will be best served by the use of African languages.
7. The effective and rapid development of science and technology in Africa depends on the use of African languages and modern technology must be used for the development of African languages.
8. Democracy is essential for the equal development of African languages and African languages are vital for the development of democracy based on equality and social justice.
9. African languages like all languages contain gender bias. The role of African languages in development must overcome this gender bias and achieve gender equality.
10. African languages are essential for the decolonization of African minds and for the African Renaissance.

The initiative which has materialized in the *Against All Odds* conference must be continued through biennial conferences in different parts of Africa. In order to organize future conferences in different parts of Africa, create a forum of dialogue and cooperation and advance the principles of this declaration, a permanent Secretariat will be established, which will be initially based in Asmara, Eritrea.

Translated into as many African languages as possible and based on these principles, the Asmara Declaration is affirmed by all participants in *Against All Odds*. We call upon all African states, the OAU, the UN and all international organizations that serve Africa to join this effort of recognition and support for African languages, with this declaration as a basis for new policies.

While we acknowledge with pride the retention of African languages in some parts of Africa and the diaspora and the role of African languages in the formation of new languages, we urge all people in Africa and the diaspora to join in the spirit of this declaration and become part of the efforts to realize its goals.

Asmara, 17th of January 2000