

Women and Publishing in Africa: Article for the Africa Books Collective

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Introduction

Choosing to publish books for a largely non-literate audience is not a career choice that many people would make. But in fact, people who are dedicated to publishing in African languages generally emerge from the ranks of militants who hold national language education and communication as a belief, rather than being professional editors who have the skills and savvy to run a profitable business. When I founded Associates in Research & Education for Development (ARED) in 1990 as a non-profit editor and training organization, no one could have predicted that we would be selling over 40,000 books per year in Pulaar just ten years later. National language publishing lacks almost all of the essential ingredients needed to make it a viable part of the book sector in Africa - authors, readers, professional editors and a distribution network, just to name the four most important elements. So if one is going to make a success of such a "career choice", one needs more faith, imagination, and creativity than is required in a normal business venture. This is the story of one person, an American woman, who became such an editor in the Pulaar language in Senegal.

Background and training

My love affair with the Pulaar language began in 1974 when I was a doctoral student in African Languages and Literature at the University of Wisconsin. My classroom studies were in the field of African literature, as I prepared to tape and analyze a collection of Pulaar oral traditions in the Gambia. However, once in the field and faced with the daunting task of transcribing hours and hours of recorded oral performances, I found that linguistic questions were more interesting to me than

those of literary criticism. While Pulaar had been comparatively well studied as a language, all studies stopped at the level of word or sentence formation in isolation – whereas I was faced with trying to understand the flow of language in context, invoking questions of reference, time, order, logical connection, emphasis etc. which were not treated in standard grammars. Frequently I would look at a sentence thinking ‘I know every word in this sentence, yet I don't understand what it means!’, or puzzled over where to place punctuation marks in a text for which someone had simply transcribed all the words without adding any of these indicators of meaning. In all I spent six years working on this collection of texts—living and working in Senegal by this time—and eventually completed a dissertation entitled “Syntactic Expansions in Text: Beyond Subject-Verb-Object in the Pulaar Language”, which combined my early interest in Pulaar oral traditions with a growing passion for the language itself and work in linguistics.

Upon completing my doctorate, I returned to Senegal with the intention of continuing the study of Pulaar, and doing short-term consulting which eventually included writing several language teaching manuals for various Pulaar dialects. The year I returned, 1982, proved to be a turning point not only in my own life, but in the development and promotion of the Pulaar language in general, and the foundations for becoming an editor were laid. In November 1982 I attended the general assembly for a cultural organization known as the Association pour la Renaissance du Pulaar (ARP). The most important outcome of that meeting was to place literacy in the Pulaar language at the forefront of this organization's activities. Discovering – or creating – a firm link between culture, language and literacy, the ARP was able to organize and lead a grassroots movement to promote literacy. I spent all my spare time from 1982 to 1989 traveling to visit various community literacy classes taught by local volunteers, at that time mostly students from the French high school system who were willing to teach Pulaar literacy to their family and neighbors during vacation months.

Tentative beginnings of a publishing venture: The GIPLLN

In 1985, after watching this movement grow and solidify its gains, five friends (three linguists and two authors) met together and remarked that what was missing from this literacy movement were books! This was literacy being practiced as an oral tradition. The major means of transmission of written texts were the notebooks in which individuals copied Pulaar texts from classroom blackboards. They, in turn, copied from their notebooks back onto another blackboard, and so information, and the orthography of Pulaar, was spread.

However, author Yero Dooro Jallo (who had already published his own manuscripts while a student in Cairo) and university linguist Fary Kâ, were convinced that the publishing of books in Pulaar for Senegal was within their reach if they pooled their resources. I quickly joined in this effort, in part because I had one of the first computers in Senegal equipped to type with Pulaar characters. A second university linguist, Mamadou Ndiaye, and the then president of the ARP, Aboubacry Deme completed this group. The five of us, without any knowledge of what is involved in editing or publishing, decided that we would publish Yero Dooro Jallo's first novel, Ndikkiri Joom Moolo (A First Born and his Guitar), named after a wonderfully touching and funny main character who made every reader laugh and cry as the words jumped out from the page. We spent Saturday mornings huddled around the computer at my house, reading aloud this 200 page text on the computer screen and making editorial changes and corrections. Our task included adding everything from commas and periods, to paragraphs and chapters, since Yero Dooro didn't use any of these writing conventions, although we discovered that the text was impeccably and tightly structured, in the tradition of an oral narrative. Once our editing was completed, the Joint Christian Ministries in West Africa (an organization based in Nigeria and interested in publishing in Pulaar) gave us \$1000 to cover printing costs, and off we went to find a printer.

Our first attempt was disappointing. The local printer pointed out that the dot matrix printer we had used didn't give a good enough impression for publication. Over the next two years we were blocked, trying to find a solution to this problem,

until I was finally able to personally acquire a laser printer, and then create the post-script characters needed for the Pulaar alphabet. Finally, in 1988, we were able to print this book. It was stored under my bed at home. While the other four members took it “door-to-door”, especially to existing literacy classes, I sold it to eager new readers from my kitchen door. Somehow they had heard that they could purchase copies there.

*To our surprise, sales went like wildfire, so we decided the best option was to quickly create an organization which would supposedly handle not only the sales of this book, but the editing and printing of the other numerous manuscripts we had in our possession, many precariously stored for years in suitcases and boxes. Thus was born the Groupe d'Initiative pour la Promotion du Livre en Langues Nationales (GIPLLN). Early sales of this first book brought in enough money to cover the printing costs of our second book, *Tinndi, Cifti e Pulareeji (Stories, Riddles and Proverbs)* by Aboubacry Deme, and so on. Furthermore, these publications drew the attention of various donors who eventually funded five of the eleven books which we “published” from 1988 to 1990, selling them exclusively through personal contacts, although greatly aided by the existing ARP network of literacy classes and teachers.*

Throughout this period, the five founding members did all of the work on a voluntary basis, each person having another full-time job. We were simply interested in seeing the publications come to print, and had no goals or intentions of making this into a remunerative activity, or even an activity which generated enough funds to cover costs. We set our book prices at the cost of printing them, since this was the only cost – an external one – which we were paying at the time.

*However, in 1990, we were shocked to discover that we had no more copies of our most popular book, *Ndikkiri Joom Moolo*. It was sold out, and all the proceeds had been invested in the printing of other books. Given this experience, plus recent field experience in organizing literacy classes and training teachers to teach them, I decided in 1990 to create a second organization, Associates in Research & Education for Development (ARED) with the objective of publishing new experimental literacy materials, training literacy teachers to use them – and offering free editorial*

support to the GIPLLN so that we could continue the dream of publishing literature next to the literacy materials in which ARED specialized.

The Creation of ARED

Associates in Research and Education for Development (ARED) was created as a non-profit organization in 1990. Although officially an American organization, ARED's main office is located in Dakar, Senegal. The initial concept for ARED grew largely out of my work with a project to develop literacy teaching materials in Wolof and Pulaar which was funded by UNICEF. The donor indicated that it was preferable to be an organization rather than several individual consultants. However, as soon as ARED was created, this funding dried up, so I quickly had to begin the search for other partners and sources of funding, defining as I did so the mission of ARED as an organization.

From the beginning, ARED defined itself as a “publisher”, albeit a “non-profit” one. However, we combined the activities of writing and publishing our own literacy materials with the task of training associations and non-profits to use these materials in the field. Our early staff were all drawn from the most talented literacy teachers with whom I had worked in other contexts – and none with experience in either writing, editing or publishing.

Similar to the GIPLLN, ARED had its own internal team of “authors” who produced our early materials. Conception and page layout were collapsed into one function, as we struggled to write directly in page layout software just the right amount of text for a given pedagogical approach and a pre-defined page layout. Unlike the GIPLLN, whose authors were primarily interested in fiction, creative writing, and/or culture preservation, ARED's authors (myself included) were interested in developing training materials in Pulaar on a vast array of topics - teaching reading, math skills, creative writing, animation skills, budget projections, project development, Participatory Rural Appraisal tools, management skills, leadership skills, lobbying,

negotiation and mediation skills, conflict resolution, etc. The two organizations were complementary in focus, and created a wide gamut of materials for both individual book buyers (who went for the cultural materials) and other non-profit organizations (which were looking for training materials for use in their classes). While I personally continued to work at ARED in the same voluntary capacity that I had in the GIPLLN, the rest of the staff were employed by ARED. One of their tasks was to provide the “editorial support” (ie, typing, correcting, page layout, printing, and distribution) which the GIPLLN needed for its books.

However, the editorial support that ARED could offer in the early days was of rather low quality. We owned one 512 MacIntosh (with the tiny screen of those “single footprint” computers); we did the page layout of our first 120 page math book on Superpaint, in which every page was a separate document; our illustrations were scanned using Thunderscan, a small implement which took the place of the ribbon on our dot matrix printer. Furthermore, ARED’s staff in those days had never touched a computer before starting to work for ARED, but rather came from a group of voluntary literacy teachers with whom I had worked in the past.

One of the issues every African language editor faces is whether to hire professionals in the editorial process, but whose language skills are limited, or whether to hire a team of enthusiastic “militants” for the language and culture, but who need editorial training. I opted for the latter. Fortunately, two individuals whom I had first trained as literacy teachers and trainers, Awa Kâ and Mamadou Ly, quickly showed a true talent for working with computers, as well as with written texts in Pulaar. Typing Pulaar on an English keyboard using two fingers, and staying in the office until 2 AM trying to figure out how various software functions worked, they became part of the core ARED team (which today is made up of three additional people) which went on to write, edit and do the page layout of the more than 60 new titles—as well as 24 translations into other languages and completely revised reprints of over 50 books—that ARED went on to publish from 1991 to 1999.

Finding a strategic niche and creating a strategic plan

One of the most important factors in the success of our work in these early years was the gradual evolution of certain educational and informational “niches” for which we became very well know. This was eventually formalized in the creation of seven series or collections in which all of our books were grouped. These series included:

- 1) basic literacy and math instruction,*
- 2) planning and leadership skills,*
- 3) civil society,*
- 4) Fulbe culture,*
- 5) public health,*
- 6) technological and scientific information,*
- 7) religion.*

We began a continuing process of experimenting with new methods for teaching reading and other essential skills (communications in every form, math skills, and management being the core modules), testing them in the field, bringing them to print – and then training other organizations to use them. For example, we are currently working on a method which allows highly mobile pastoralists to learn to read and write without coming to class, something they are never able to do with any regularity. Having an internal pool of “author-editors”, who also spend 50% of their time in the field training community groups, has turned out to be a very functional mode of operation for ARED. We are never far from the audience which buys our books, as we test new materials, as well as training community literacy teachers in the process on how to use ARED materials in their classrooms.

A second field of interest which has become predominate is to work with university specialists on the concept of creating a civil society, working in teams in which the professors provide the content and we at ARED provide the approach, so that these books, originally written in Pulaar, reflect the needs, level and interests of

new literates in Pulaar. In connection with this, we have also developed a large number of books which are designed specifically for herders, a major group of Pulaar speakers who are largely marginalized both socially and economically in West Africa today. Current research has shown what a well-adapted system the traditional mobile pattern of herding actually is in the Sahel, a zone where resources are both scarce and never in the same amount in the same place from year to year. We strive to bring the results of this research to herders, so that they can better organize and lobby for their interests, supported by the data and arguments they find in our books.

Finally, ARED has continued to publish creative and cultural literature, and these books prove to be of immense popularity amongst readers. Individual book buyers inevitably go for these titles, rather than the more “functional” or educational ones.

From 1990 to 1998, members and staff at ARED gradually improved their skills, and most became regular salaried staff, as opposed to volunteers or consultants. As staff skills increased, it became clear that ARED needed to put in place a coherent program of both staff development, as well as a career plan which would encourage staff to remain with ARED as their skills became more valuable. In 1998, ARED began a three-year training project for editors in African languages in francophone West Africa, developed and funded by the DSE (German Foundation for International Development). This was the first professional training in editing that ARED was to receive. One of the first surprises of this training was to discover that one of the primary goals of an editor is to distribute (ie, sell) their books! Up until that time, we had thought that our primary goal was to produce books. Even though we were averaging sales of 2000 books per month, it had never occurred to us to consider sales as important as production. I discovered that I was an “entrepreneur” with a stock of 100,000 books in our office garage which needed to be distributed, and for the first time, ARED began to study ways to actually get our books to our readers, who obviously were not looking in city-based bookstores – which, in any case, refused to carry our books.

The second major discovery was the definition of what it means to be an

editor. We had begun as authors who edited their own books, and so thought of ourselves in those terms. We had no training nor explicit ideas on how to edit – we just worked and re-worked manuscripts until the entire staff was happy with the results, a process which could take months, even years. We made no choices of titles to publish based on sales potential, but mostly because someone on the staff found a topic of personal interest, or because a donor had requested a specific title. And we especially didn't accept manuscripts coming from “the outside” because we had no idea how to deal with authors who weren't part of the structure itself. Our internal authors from both ARED and the GIPLLN kept us supplied with good manuscripts, so no attention was focused on finding and cultivating new authors.

As part of this shift towards ARED becoming a more professional editor – though still a non-profit one – the GIPLLN decided to dissolve itself, since this group made up largely of authors was mostly interested in writing, not in the nitty-gritty of editing and publishing. ARED took over the stock of books which had been published uniquely by or jointly with the GIPLLN. We also began the practice of paying author's rights to new authors who brought in unsolicited manuscripts, in order to encourage the development of a larger pool of authors in national languages. We find it particularly fascinating and gratifying to publish an author who has never been to school, and whose sole experience with reading and writing has come from literacy classes in Pulaar. Not only is this a sign of the tremendous effort that they have made to become “self-educated”, but their approach to writing often shows the underlying categories of thought which have not yet been influenced by wide reading of many books.

Through the DSE, ARED staff also received training in page layout, including how to use crucial software such as XPress and Photoshop. The time allotted for the page layout of a training manual went from 6 months to 2 weeks, given these new techniques. We also learned some of the basic principles of page design so that our materials became more attractive, not simply based on sound pedagogical presentation.

In this process of identifying the role and function of an editor, it became clear

that ARED had indeed become an “editor”, no longer functioning as a “prestatire” which simply did the translation, typing and page layout of books which had been chosen by a donor and brought to us. In the early days, we accepted these types of contracts because they brought in extra funding. But as our reputation was established, we began rejecting the content of certain books which did not fit with our philosophy, and certainly would no longer do work for an organization if they weren't willing to give us the copyright and the right to sell these books, so that these books could be reprinted whenever necessary.

Where is ARED today?

Little would have indicated in 1974 that I would become an editor in African languages. Each choice and decision grew out of opportunities which presented themselves, and a strong belief that this was the right path to be on. As opportunities came up, I found ways to mold them into a coherent overall strategy that has been the foundation of ARED as an organization. Some of these strategies only became clear in retrospect, and at our 10th anniversary, I wrote several articles reflecting on the path we had taken, and how we had both influenced, and been molded by, our surrounding context.

Today, as director of ARED, I see a potentially bright future for African language publishing, and am astonished to see how few other editors have made this a major priority. The demand for books, both from individual readers and from educational institutions is growing. Old titles continue to sell well, and new titles catch on quickly. Since 1990, ARED has published a total of 414,650 books, of which 281,557 have been sold. And this in a context where there is absolutely no system of publicity for our titles, nor any type of distribution system. Every one of ARED's books is sold out of our offices in Dakar, the capital of Senegal.

We have also begun to work on a regional scale, translating several of our most creative training materials first into French, and then supporting groups who

need these materials in other African languages.

As an non-profit publisher, we have the privilege of being able to experiment with new types of materials which the growing but new and inexperienced market doesn't know to ask for, since our bottom-line is not dependent on sales. Nevertheless, of the \$500,000 which has been invested in printing costs alone since 1990, half of that has been reinvested from the sales of existing books; the remaining half coming from supportive partners.

The challenge of showing the potential of African language publishing has been met. What remains is a challenge to not only work on the continued production of good materials, but to also contribute to the creation of a distribution system which will get these books out to where the market exists.