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The alchemy of translation in Hausa: cosmopolitanism, gatekeeping, and infrastructure in English-Hausa translation

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ABSTRACT

In February 2023, Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho tweeted a cover of Muddassir S. Abdullahi's yet-to-be-published Hausa-language translation of Coelho's bestselling novel *The Alchemist* to his 15.2 million followers. At the same time Ibrahim Sheme was putting the finishing touches on his Hausa translation of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Both cases show Hausa literary voices engaging in global conversations about world literature through translation. In this article, I draw on recent interviews with translators and publishers in Northern Nigeria to give a brief history of translation between English and Hausa, and then I make three linked interventions. First, I examine the ideal of translation as a cosmopolitan practice that enables stories and ideas to cross the boundaries of language. Second, I point out how this ideal is complicated by imbalances of power and by gatekeeping in both English- and Hausa-language literary spaces. Finally, I address the anxieties of publishers and editors about how readers of translations might respond to the crossing of language, cultural, and stylistic boundaries. I end with thoughts on the structures needed to successfully translate, publish, and market a translated literary text to audiences of Hausa and English.

KEYWORDS

Hausa; translation; cosmopolitanism; Nigerian literature; world literature

Introduction

In November 2023, *The Republic Magazine*, one of Nigeria's leading online magazines, published a column entitled "7 Books to Read about Life in Northern Nigeria." Although *The Republic* had previously published articles on the flourishing Hausa-language literary scene (Sada Malumfashi), the books on this list, meant to "serve as windows into the complexities and nuances of life in this dynamic part of the country," featured only novels and short stories in English. There was no mention of the thousands of Hausa-language novels written over the past century, nor even a sampling given of the few novels that have been translated from Hausa into English.

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This column illustrates how Northern Nigeria is seen outside the region through an English-language lens, and it speaks to the scarcity of easily accessible translations of texts from Hausa into English. In a region with thousands of Hausa novels, there were only four or five full-length novel translations into English that I could point to in my comment on the online article. Yet this situation does not mean that there is no translation going on in Hausa literary spaces. Despite stereotypes in English-language Nigerian media about “the uneducated North,” Northern Nigeria and the Sahel, where Hausa is spoken, have a centuries-long tradition of scholarship and translation. Hausa-speaking intellectuals have tended to be less concerned about speaking to what Pascale Casanova calls the “world republic of letters” in European languages than in thinking about how world literature contributes to ongoing conversations in Kano or Sokoto or Zaria. As Graham Furniss points out, conversations about postcolonial society in Hausa are “not as a peripheral satellite world struggling to find itself in a relationship to English and European culture, but as a vigorous arena in its own right relating to its own cosmopolitan traditions of cultural thought” (ix).

I draw on recent interviews with translators and publishers in Northern Nigeria to give a brief history of translation between English and Hausa and then make three linked interventions. First, I examine the ideal of translation as a cosmopolitan practice that enables stories and ideas to cross the boundaries of language. Second, I point out how this ideal is complicated by imbalances of power and by gatekeeping in both English- and Hausa-language literary spaces. Finally, I address the anxieties of publishers and editors about how readers of translations might respond to the crossing of language, cultural, and stylistic boundaries.

Translation as cosmopolitanism

Translation, as Evan Mwangi points out, is a cosmopolitan ideal, seeking to bridge differences between peoples and cultures (32). Similarly, Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that a “global community of cosmopolitans will consist of people who want to learn about other ways of life, through anthropology and history, novels, movies, news stories in newspapers, on radio and television. And if it is to be possible there will be at its heart an endless series of projects of translation, carrying as best we can what is said in one language across into another” (Appiah and Rockefeller 76). Beyond the ethnic fracturing exacerbated by colonialism, translation can act as a parallel meeting point between two languages. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has been the most tireless advocate for translation into and from African languages. Although he has been critiqued for linking language with identity in his passionate calls to “move the centre” by writing in African languages (Gikandi 140, Taiwo 56), his writing often expresses a universalist love for the literature of the world. He asks, “Why not have Balzac, Tolstoy, Sholokov, Brecht, Lu Hsun, Pablo Neruda, H.C. Anderson, Kim Chi Ha, Marx, Lenin, Alber, Einstein, Galileo, Aeschylus, Aristotle and Plato in African languages” (Ngũgĩ 8). An appreciation of such literature in African languages requires education and infrastructure building; however, Ngũgĩ’s appeal is not a nationalistic rejection of non-African language literature. Rather it is, as Tejumola Olaniyan points out, an assertion that the “only egalitarian relationship between two living languages is translation” (214). Translation enables world literature to exist in African languages

even as African literature exists in European ones. Ngūgĩ's call resonates with the way translation is spoken about by contemporary Hausa scholars and translators today.

History of translation and multilingualism in Northern Nigeria

The region now known as Northern Nigeria has a long tradition of multilingual writing, as well as of translation and literary adaptation between languages, a result of hundreds of years of trade and travel. The scholarly Fodiyo family is known for their translations of religious texts from Arabic into Hausa and Fulfulde. From the early to the mid-nineteenth century, Nana Asma'u, daughter of Sheikh Usman dan Fodiyo, wrote poetry and historical texts in Arabic for a cross-continental audience, intimate elegies for her loved ones in her mother tongue of Fulfulde, and poetry in Hausa to teach a general populace about Islam. Her multilingual strategy extended to translation, and she often worked on translation projects with her husband Gid'ad'o and brother Muhammad Bello (Boyd and Mack).

The Fodiyos' translation practices often took the approach of adaptation and commentary on the original texts. Nana Asma'u's brother Muhammad Bello once asked her to "translate and versify" his exhortation on Sufi women *Kitab al-nasiha* from Arabic into Hausa and Fulfulde (Boyd and Mack 69–71). She took the liberty of "remolding" the work, leaving out the *hadiths* that spoke to the frailty of women and focusing instead on the strengths of Sufi women saints (71). This was not a simple translation but a reworking of the source material, not only into different languages, but also into a different genre with a focus she found more appropriate. She also changed the names of the women from Arabic to the more familiar forms known in Hausa and Fulfulde (72).

The free adaptation style often continued in twentieth-century translations of European language texts into Hausa. In 1930, years after the colonial administration began using Roman script to write Hausa rather than the Ajami script used since at least the seventeenth century, the government founded the Translation Bureau (East, "Recent Activities" 71; Phillips 56). Later rebranded as the Literature Bureau, it translated Arabic-language texts such as the *Kano Chronicles*, and other Asian and European texts into Hausa as reading materials.¹ Abdalla Uba Adamu points out that Abubakar Imam, the most prolific writer to emerge from a 1933 Literature Bureau writing contest, took inspiration from the Arabic *Muqamat Al Hariri* in writing his first novella *Ruwan Bagaja*, but that he told an interviewer that he "used the Hausa way of life" to adapt the story ("Currying Favour" 79). Adamu argues that "*Ruwan Bagaja* marked the transition from ... direct translations of other works into Hausa—to its adaptive variety, Imamanci—the 'transmutation' of literature of the other, into the Hausa mindset" (79). Adamu contends that much Hausa prose fiction from the 1930s to the 1960s "continued the Imamian adaptive strategy, often adapting a foreign tale to a Hausa mindset, or directly translating from foreign sources" (81). Notable translations include at least six of Shakespeare's plays alongside other world literature, such as George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (*Gandun Dabbobi*, translated by Bala Abdullahi Funtua) and Tawfik al Hakim's play *Ahlul-Kahf* (*Mutanen Kogo*, translated from the Arabic by Ahmed Sabir). Translators often use adaptive practices, changing character names to Hausa ones and transliterating settings to Hausa locations, seemingly less concerned

with maintaining faithfulness to the original work than with domesticating the text to contribute to ongoing conversations in Hausa (Sulaiman 59–60; Umar et al. 77).²

Although publishing materials in Hausa Roman script was initially a Christian missionary innovation and a large amount of evangelical material is published in Hausa, including three different Bible translations, the colonial regime's adoption of the script and publication of secular materials paved the way for the spread of anti-colonial ideological material, such as the nationalist writing of Aminu Kano, Mudi Sipikin, and others. Such writing arose despite early colonial attempts to use Roman script to break the connection to revolutionary anticolonial writing in Arabic (Phillips 76). In the 1970s, Hausa translations from Moscow-based Progress Publishers of Soviet authors, such as Leonid Solovyov, Vera Panova, and Cingiz Aitmatov, furthered a progressive influence (Kirk-Greene 349). Translator Mudassir Abdullahi told me of the childhood impact of “a book on Lenin translated [as] *Yara, ku zo ku ji labarin Lenin* (‘Children, Come and Hear the Story of Lenin’)” (personal interview). Following in this decolonial tradition, Hausa scholars such as Yakubu Magaji Azare have called for the “Hausanization of knowledge” to empower Hausa speakers and spread technological and scientific understanding that he argues English education has stymied (65–67). Malumfashi and Yakasai, in their 1993 translation guide, see it as a way of indigenizing knowledge so that students do not have to master English to access technology (7):

All our educational and economic bases are locked up in foreign languages ... what we need to do is what the Greeks did, what the Arabs saw from them and what the Roman and English people have done to their people and to their nations. ...[L]et's have those mighty books translated, let's have those books that contain the magic word of transforming the society into an industrial one translated. (8)

Like Ngũgĩ, they see translation as a way of claiming the knowledge of the world in a language of their own.

While translation into Hausa is most frequently domesticated to speak to concerns in Northern Nigeria, it is also sometimes included in cosmopolitan translation projects meant to empower African languages, such as the Ankara Press 2015 *Valentine's Day Anthology* where short love stories in English were translated and recorded as oral texts in African languages. Abubakar Adam Ibrahim self-translated his short story “Painted Love” into Hausa as “Launukan So.” Similarly, translator Mazhun Idris translated a story by Ngũgĩ and a poem by Wole Soyinka into Hausa for two special issues on translation published by the Pan-African writers collective Jalada Africa. In 2017, the Abuja-based Orpheus Literary Foundation began a collaboration with China Translation and Publishing House to publish five Chinese texts into Hausa. The first of these, a translation of Li Peifu's novel *Shēng Míng Cè*, was translated as *Duniya Labari* by Abdalla d'an 'Azumi Galkos (Chunguang). In these extroverted literary projects, Hausa is imagined as a world language in conversation with other world languages for popular audiences locally and internationally.

Translation from Hausa into English and other European languages, on the other hand, is rarely packaged for popular audiences. With the exception of a few early Hausa novellas translated into simplified and abridged editions, such as Imam's *Ruwan Bagaja* and Bello Kagara's *Gandoki*, meant for use in Nigerian schools,

translation is instead often done in the context of scholarship, with footnotes and scholarly introductions for teaching non-Hausa audiences.³ One of the early translated anthologies of Hausa writing into English was C. Robinson's 1896 *Specimens of Hausa Literature*, which contained translations of Hausa poetry and historical records, including poems by Usman dan Fodiyo. Scholars like Neil Skinner translated collections of folklore, plays, and other texts in his *An Anthology of Hausa Literature* and other publications. In more recent anthologies, such as the *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u*, or *Mudi Sipikin: Selected Poems of a NEPU Activist*, scholars have anthologized poetry, sometimes for the first time, alongside translations. Bilingual dictionaries and collections of translated Hausa folklore, as well as occasional translations of poetry and fiction, have been published in English, French, German, Polish, Russian, and Chinese,⁴ and Nigerian universities have led projects to translate Arabic scholarship and religious poetry.⁵ Other translation projects done by undergraduates and masters students remain accessible only in university libraries (Furniss 88).

Of the thousands of Hausa novels written since the 1980s, there have been a few locally commissioned translations, such as Ado Ahmad Gidan Dabino's bestselling novels *In da So da Kauna*, which was translated as *The Soul of My Heart*, and *Masoyan Zamani* which was translated as *Nemesis*. These translations, however, are poorly abridged, with much of Gidan Dabino's spirited dialogue removed and replaced with English-language clichés. There have also been a few excerpts published in journals and anthologies, such as Ibrahim Malumfashi's translation of the first chapter of Rahma Abdulmajid's *Mace Mutum* in *Words Without Borders*. But there has been only one full-length English translation of a Hausa novel written in the past forty years that has been published beyond the borders of Nigeria, namely, Aliyu Kamal's translation of Balaraba Ramat Yakubu's novel *Alhaki Kuykuyo Ne* as *Sin is a Puppy that Follows You Home*, which I will discuss in more detail below. Envisioned as a part of an anthology or series of Hausa popular literature by Indian publisher Braft, Yakubu's novel ended up being the only publication because it was difficult to recruit and keep translators dedicated to the project. Although Yakubu, following the international attention garnered by the Braft translation, has commissioned Kamal to do translations of more of her other nine novels, none of them has yet been through the editing or publishing process.

Among the contemporary literary translators I have interacted with, there currently seems to be more energy to do translations of world literature into Hausa, rather than from Hausa into English or other European languages, and there is a growing recognition of the multilingualism of Northern Nigeria in publications that code-mix in English and Hausa.

Translation as cosmopolitanism in contemporary Hausa practice

In February 2023, Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho tweeted ([Figure 1](#)) to his 15.2 million followers a cover of *Alkimiyya'i*, Mudassir S. Abdullahi's Hausa-language translation of Coelho's bestselling novel *The Alchemist*, to be published by Nigerian publisher Parrésia Press, setting off a flurry of responses from intellectuals in the Hausa twitter space.



Figure 1. Publisher Richard Ali's retweet of Paulo Coelho's post on the translation. The "Na" was later removed from the title.

Coelho's tweet made it perhaps the highest-profile translation project for Hausa on the world literary stage. In the rest of this article, I discuss conversations I had with writers and translators in Kano and Abuja in July and August 2023 and 2024, following several 2013 interviews. The translators I highlight here are certainly not the only people working on translating between Hausa and English, but they raise similar issues, from the ideal of bridging languages and cultures to cautions about how to speak to specific audiences.

In each of these ventures there are assumptions about multilingual scope that reflects the historical and contemporary literacies of Northern Nigeria. There are writers' associations in Kano for not only English and Hausa but also for Fulfulde and Arabic. Khalid Imam, the bilingual writer and translator behind the Kano-based All Poets Network International, showed me several recent publishing projects he had been involved with that encompassed transnational and multilingual cooperation: *Corona Blues: A Bilingual Anthology of Poetry*, a collection of poems about the corona virus written in both English and Hausa he co-edited with poet Ismail Bala, and *Rigakafin*

Korona: Kundiñ Gajerun Labarai, a collection of personal stories written in Hausa about the COVID pandemic that he co-edited with Umma Aliyu Musa, a Hausa scholar based in Germany. These Hausa-language stories feature not only perspectives on the pandemic from writers in Nigeria or of Nigerian origin, but they also feature writing by German and Chinese students of Hausa, pointing to the cosmopolitan spread of Hausa as a language beyond Africa. Finally, in speaking of his collection *Kwaraption*, edited with Ola Ifatimehin, Imam expressed interest in the way young people in Northern Nigeria effortlessly code-mix between English and Hausa. Such code-mixing has been happening for years in popular music. Imam put together a competition for Engausa poetry and published the submissions in what he claims is the pioneering edition of Engausa poetry. The back cover is filled with encomiums for an innovation that, as B. M. Dzukogi pointed out, was the “language of the future Nigeria since young people are its major speakers. This hybridization of language was imminent as people of different ethnic groups get mixed daily.” Kabura Zakama in his blurb compares the language to other hybrid world languages “If they can have Spanglish, we can have Engausa.” These All Poets Network International publications emphasize the coming together of languages. Not only is Hausa a world language that is spoken as far away as Germany and China, but writers of English, Hausa, and Engausa are published together—an activist assertion about the equality of languages that bring cultures together. Imam pointed out to me that his co-editor Ola Ifatimehin “is not Hausa. He is Yoruba. But because he grew up in a Hausa community in Zaria, he is able to speak Hausa better than his own language Yoruba” (personal interview). These projects emphasize the cosmopolitan nature of Hausa, that like English, can be spoken by people of multiple backgrounds and ethnicities to express common interests and experiences.

Contemporary publishing ventures both project into the future and reach back to the past. Gidan Dabino, bestselling Hausa novelist, publisher, filmmaker, and winner of the now discontinued Engineer Mohammed Bashir Karaye Prize for Hausa Literature for his play *Malam Zalimu*, collaborated with scholar Abdalla Uba Adamu’s Visually Ethnographic Networks on an “Ajamization of Knowledge Project” in 2021 to publish secular reading materials in the Ajami Warsh script most often used in the region (Adamu, “The Gutenberg Principle” 26). They experimented with an Ajami-language newspaper, drawing on the centuries-old networks of scholarship in the region that was written both in Arabic and in African languages using Ajami script. While Hausa speakers are voracious consumers of news, listening to world news in Hausa broadcasts from BBC, VOA, Radio Deutsche Welle, China Radio International, and so on, not everyone can read in Roman script. Gidan Dabino told me that their newspaper *Tabarau mai hangan Nesa* (“Telescope”) made the written news available to anyone who had been educated in an Islamic school and could read Arabic script. This newspaper is not the first of its kind. The first Hausa newspaper, *Gaskiya Ta fi Kwabo*, distributed news sheets in Ajami (East, “Recent Activities” 75), and *Alfijir* is a longstanding Ajami newspaper published by Triumph Publishing in Kano. Like many Hausa-language newspapers that are not profitable in part because they are not published daily (Bunza 295), *Tabarau* was not able to make enough money from advertising or sales to last more than seven months, but the commitment of the Visually Ethnographic Networks to making material available in the Ajami Warsh script, most used in Nigeria, put into place an infrastructure for future publishing projects.

Richard Ali, co-founder of Parrésia Press,⁶ told me, for example, that he is planning to publish an Ajami version of *The Alchemist/Alkimyya'i* alongside the Hausa translation in Roman script. While Ali acknowledged that this is more of an intellectual project than a commercial one, his vision is of a continuation from the literary tradition of the precolonial era, expanding materials available in Ajami from religious and historical texts to the prose fiction pioneered in Roman script. Many Hausa novelists are literate in Ajami and Roman scripts. Indeed, *The Alchemist's* translator Abdullahi's education in both government schools and Islamiyya, where he learned English and Arabic, inspired his first translation projects. Raised in a multilingual home full of books and speaking Hausa, Arabic, English, and some Fulfulde, he started translating Arabic texts he read in his Islamiyya into English. When he asked novelist Abubakar Adam Ibrahim if he could translate his English short story collection *The Whispering Trees* into Hausa, Ibrahim connected him with his publisher Richard Ali.

Ali himself told me that *The Alchemist* translation project started when Abdullahi contacted him about a call for translations that he had seen from Coelho's agents. Abdullahi told me he was drawn to the novel in part because he recognized the influence of Arabic literature in Coelho's work. He acknowledged that Coelho was Catholic, but he was drawn to the novel's mysticism and message of tolerance that resonated with his own Sufi beliefs. As opposed to the Salafist movements that have politicized arts and culture in Northern Nigeria for over fifty years, and the more recent incursion of violent movements like Boko Haram, he believes that "I'm not going to fight you either literally or figuratively over differences in interpretation in Islamic ideologies. Sufis believe that to everyone his God. You can't interfere between me and my God. It's only God that knows my destiny. You can't say that I belong to Hellfire so you're going to bomb me" (Mudassir Abdullahi, personal interview). This openness, Abdullahi believes, helped him become a translator: "I was raised with cultural freedom. Since I was a kid, I read everything. I listened to everything. I listen to people I do not agree with. I talk to people I do not agree with" (personal interview).

The Alchemist appealed to Abdullahi because it brought together characters who were Muslim Arabs and European Christians, which also influenced the way he translated it. Although he had to work from the English translation of the novel rather than the Portuguese original (a fact that he laments is the translation's greatest weakness), he tried to linguistically relocate the novel into its North African setting, historically more familiar to a Hausa audience than to the English-speaking audience of the translation he was working from, by using Arabic in some of the dialogue: "Because the character is speaking Arabic, I wanted people to feel like the characters are speaking in Arabic" (Abdullahi, personal interview). Similarly, for the Englishman in the text, he sometimes left phrases or sentences in English. In this way, he took an English-language translation that assumes a monolingual English audience—only one word of Arabic, *Maktub* (it is written), is used—and prepared it for a more sophisticated, multilingual, Hausa-speaking readership. When I asked if he footnoted some of the sentences he translated into Arabic or left in English, he said, "I don't do that because the dialogue is simple. Almost ninety percent of my readers will know what that means" (Abdullahi, personal interview). His translation strategy is like that of Ngũgĩ, whose Gikuyu novels include smatterings of Swahili, English, and other languages he assumes his readers will know.

The Alchemist is, perhaps, the model novel for a cosmopolitan ideal of translation, as evidenced by its actual translation into over eighty languages. Publisher Harper-Collins advertises on its website that it holds the Guinness World Record for being the “most translated book by a living author.” As Coelho puts it in his 2014 foreword to the English translation,

When I read about clashes around the world—political clashes, economic clashes, cultural clashes—I am reminded that it is within our power to build a bridge to be crossed. ... There is always a chance for reconciliation, a chance that one day he and I will sit around a table together and put an end to our history of clashes. And on this day, he will tell me his story and I will tell him mine.

The passion for translation shared by Abdullahi, a translator from Kano with a Muslim Hausa-Fulani background, and Ali, a publisher who grew up in Jos with a Christian Middle-Belt background, makes *The Alchemist* a particularly significant text to experiment with. It was also a savvy marketing move on the part of Parrésia Press, whose Hausa book cover was tweeted out to fifteen million of Coelho’s fans. Coelho’s tweet placed the Hausa translation on a stage with other literary languages of the world and, indeed, placed the publisher on a larger stage than it has ever been, even given its English-language publications. Twitter fame is fleeting, however. By 2024, the tweet had been deleted, and the funding for Parrésia’s project had been impacted by the falling value of the naira. As of January 2025, the project is still pending.

One of the other most translated works of twentieth-century world literature is Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. In a 2019 article, *Brittle Paper* identified sixty-one translations. Ironically, only one of the official publications on *Brittle Paper*’s list was into a Nigerian language, Wale Ogunyemi’s 1997 translation into Yoruba, *Ìgbésí Ayé Okonkwo*. That scarcity is not for want of trying. Ernest Emenyonu points out that there are two Igbo translations, published within one year of each other (neither of which made the *Brittle Paper* list), Izuu Nwankwo’s *Ihe Aghasaa* (2008) and P.A. Ezikeojiaku’s *Agharata* (2009) (99), yet these translations are so little publicized that a December 2024 Google Scholar search for Nwankwo’s came up with only eight hits, and Ezikeojiaku’s came up with only four. Jerome Okonkwo accuses Achebe of refusing to “in his life-time ... give his votum or fiat for the translation ... into his mother tongue,” so that Ezikeojiaku’s translation “remained unpopular and unknown to the Igbo academic world” (24). Ibrahim Sheme, a bilingual writer, public intellectual, filmmaker, publisher, and the winner of the first Engineer Mohammed Bashir Karaye Prize for Hausa Literature for his novel ‘Yartsana, first began translating *Things Fall Apart* into Hausa in 1997. Sheme played an important part in the championing of Hausa popular literature in the 1990s, hosting many of the literary debates about the movement in newspaper and magazine columns that he edited. In addition to his ongoing translation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* into Hausa, he is so passionate about translating *Things Fall Apart* that he has translated it twice—first in the late 1990s, and second after losing the first translation to a computer crash. He finished the second translation in 2023. In my 2013 interview with him, an excerpt of which was published in *Chimurenga Chronic*, he told me he was attracted to the project because “Umuofia looked and sounded like my own village, and I could easily identify Okonkwo and

many other characters in that book amongst my own village folk” (McCain and Sheme 21). In his translation he balanced wanting his Hausa audience to see these similarities and maintaining the Igbo character of the novel.

Regarding Sheme’s translation of the novel, which he titled *Bango Ya Tsage* (“The Wall is Cracked”) in Hausa, he echoed Appiah, stating that

The world is a global village, and such great barriers as language and cultures should be broken through massive translation of books and films because doing so will foster understanding amongst people with divergent backgrounds. As a university student in the mid-80s, I came to understand the way of the life of the Chinese, Indians, and the French through reading books translated from their languages to English. (Ibrahim Sheme, personal interview, 2013; McCain and Sheme 21)

Sheme believes it is particularly important for Nigerians to translate Nigerian literature into Nigerian languages. Although he has long been a champion of Hausa literature as a writer, editor, and publisher, he nevertheless criticized the contemporary movement for being insular: “Hausa authors are too ensconced in their own world, ... I doubt if five Hausa authors have ever read any of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novels, the stories of Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, Sumaila Umaisha, E. E. Sule, Labo Yari and others, much less the works of other Nigerian/African and non-African authors. That says a lot about their exposure” (McCain and Sheme 21). His mission in translating *Things Fall Apart* is to expose the literary community and other Hausa readers to the novel often described as “the greatest African novel in English” (Sheme, personal interview, 2023). Although he recognized the commonality between his village and the village portrayed by Achebe, he also “learned a lot about Igbo culture from that book” (personal interview, 2023), which he wanted to share with his readers. He avoided the “Hausanization” practices typical of many other Hausa translations of world literature where, for example, “Macbeth was called Makau. When I came to do the translation of *Things Fall Apart*, I didn’t try to produce a Hausa story as those authors tried to do. I wanted the Hausa reader to read an Igbo story told in Hausa language, not an Igbo story that has been Hausanized in order to sit well with the Hausa reader” (personal interview, 2023). Recognizing the writing Achebe did as a kind of translation from Igbo into English—what Paul Bandia has called intercultural writing as translation—he told me, “It’s an Igbo novel in English so it could have been an Igbo [novel] in Hausa. ... All I did was to write it for him in Hausa. I just put on his shoes, kind of, and did it on his behalf” (personal interview, 2023). Sheme’s romantic view of translation is reminiscent of T. R. Steiner’s reading of seventeenth-century translator George Chapman, who imagined “spiritual commerce between the translator and the original author,” the attempt by a translator to “inhabit the consciousness capable of this particular work” (11).

Sheme tries to help his audience experience the story as Achebe wrote it, including most of the Igbo words that Achebe left in the original. He told me that part of his motivation was so that “Hausa readers could also get an insight into Igbo culture and appreciate the various differences and where they meet, where cultures even mix” (Sheme, personal interview, 2023). In this way he is carrying the story across ethnic boundaries which have often been politicized as sources of conflict in Nigeria. In 2023 he reiterated that it was rare to find Nigerians translating each other. In *Bango*

Ya Tsage, he is trying to do something different, to build bridges between cultures so that Hausa readers can inhabit, as he did as a translator, another way of life.

Power relations and gatekeeping in translation

The writers and translators I spoke to posited translation as an ideal to create dialogue between languages and cultures; however, their work is also subject to the “hierarchies of dominance and marginality” that Lawrence Venuti (209) argues is inherent to translation. Postcolonial theorist Tejaswini Niranjana points to the “complicitous relationship of translation and the imperialistic vision” which, she argues, a focus on the “humanistic nature of translation” misses (61).

Questions of imperialism were relevant to Hausa writing even before European colonialism. Although often celebrated for their intellectual literary work, Usman dan Fodiyo and his family began the nineteenth-century jihad against the Hausa kingdoms in part because they were concerned about the mixing of Islamic expression with profane popular expression. The multilingual cosmopolitanism of Nana Asma’u and other leaders of the Sokoto Caliphate, who wrote histories and poetry to establish political and religious hegemony, differs ideologically from the humanist cosmopolitanism expressed by scholars like Appiah and Mwangi or even translators like Abdullahi and Sheme. Mwangi points out that simply writing in an African language does not make a text progressive. Cosmopolitanism, he argues, only exists with a humanism that respects diversity (2). Historically, translation between Hausa and other languages was not always a sharing of ideals but was a form of dominance.

Similarly, the colonial Translation Bureau was established to create reading materials in the Hausa Roman script, that the British had imposed for colonial communication and education, effectively making functional illiterates of thousands of readers and writers. The director of the Bureau at that time, R. M. East, dismissed the literature written before the colonial era as being mostly religious. Instead, he presented the colonial writing contest as a way to overcome the “extremely serious-minded” attitude toward writing and develop a literary taste more in keeping with English values. The ultimate goal was to “confound the skeptics by producing a really first-class indigenous literature” (352–53). Author Abubakar Imam, who adapted stories from the *Arabian Nights* in his novella for the writing contest and later in his three-part *Magana Jari Ce*, later wrote about East’s intervention in his writing process as giving him European storybooks to learn how to write (Imam 26).

Likewise, Moradewun Adejunmobi points out the power imbalances between languages that often occur in translations from African originals to a European language, where the English-language translations have far more power than the originals (“Contextualizing the Vernacular” 40–41). Coelho himself writes in the 2014 foreword to the English-language translation of *The Alchemist* that the original Portuguese novel initially did not sell well in Brazil. Its bestselling success came only when it had been translated into English. The subsequent translation into over eighty languages came about in part only because it had first been translated into English. The same can be said for the success of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, which he wrote in the English of his education rather than the Igbo of his upbringing, or of Wole Soyinka and Abdulrazak Gurnah whose works were noticed by Nobel Prize committees

because they were written in English rather than Yoruba or Swahili. *The Alchemist's* translator Abdullahi pointed out that the Nobel Prize was awarded to Naguib Mahfouz only after his novels were translated into English, and he told me that he anticipated the day when a Hausa writer would also win the Nobel Prize because of translation. Although translation enables readers to access literature across languages, aspirations toward the prizes that create world literature canons point to the inequities between world languages. A prize like the Nobel, with its imperial history, has much more social capital and investment in it than a prize like the Engineer Mohammed Bashir Karaye Prize for Hausa Literature, which only ran for a few years before going on hiatus. The literary tastes of world literature that invest in translation and award infrastructure are driven by Western gatekeepers.

So far, Hausa literature has not reached the attention of world literary tastemakers. While some careful academic translation work has been done into European languages, these translations rarely reach popular audiences, and where attempts have been made to reach popular English-speaking audiences, the publicity has reinforced stereotypical expectations of Western audiences. For example, I have critiqued elsewhere how Western media covered American photojournalist Glenna Gordon's photographs of contemporary Hausa women writers in her photobook *Diagram of a Heart*, which included some of my own translated excerpts of Hausa novels. The reviews of Gordon's book sensationalized the idea of Muslim African women writing in a time of Boko Haram, without engaging with any actual literary texts (McCain "Translator's Note").

Despite the optimism of translators like Abdullahi or SHEME, translators often run into obstacles in the form of gatekeeping both from English-language agents and publishers as well as from religious and academic guardians of Hausa. Many early translation projects into Hausa from older texts that were not under Western copyright protection laws took an approach that viewed the texts as communal property, but translators of contemporary novels into Hausa have had to face the bureaucracy of getting permission from publishers and agents based in Europe and the United States. As Ruth Bush has noted, copyright laws privilege the author and publisher (22, 86). The interest of publishing institutions in the United States and Britain can make or break the success of a translation. Coelho and his agents apparently solicited translations. Considering Coelho's record for being the most translated living author, each new translation of his novel adds to its marketing appeal. In 2019 Coelho declared that he would donate his books to schools and libraries in Africa and solicited requests for donations (Dahir). Ali told me that although Coelho's agents did not immediately respond to Abdullahi's translation query, when Ali wrote them as a publisher, Parrésia Press was able to purchase the copyright for the Hausa translation, and both Coelho and Parrésia were able to gain publicity from the yet-to-be-published translation.

Achebe's novel, on the other hand, has been notoriously difficult to get permission to translate into Nigerian languages. Such translations receive little recognition, to which the competing Igbo translations, neither of which has received public validation from Achebe or his estate, attest. As Adejunmobi points out, this is complicated by the controversies surrounding Achebe's use of the "standard but contested orthography" ("Contextualizing the Vernacular" 37) in his own forays into Igbo writing.

Perhaps Achebe just wanted to translate his own novel but was discouraged by the polemics around standardization.

When I first interviewed SHEME in 2013 about his *Things Fall Apart* translation, he mentioned the difficulties he had trying to speak to Achebe about it. He told me that he was invited in 2009 by Wale Okediran, then president of the Association of Nigerian Authors, to join a group of writers to meet Achebe at the Abuja airport:

We set out at dawn. We received Achebe. I was armed with my translation of *Things Fall Apart* in order to show him and know what he thought. But my dream was shattered by the fact that unknown to us, the Anambra State government had planned to also receive Achebe at the airport. It all became a security and political jamboree, and we, the ANA group, were literally sidelined as the government people took over. We were only allowed to shake Achebe's hand and tap him on the shoulder before he was whisked away in jeeps. Later, Dr. Okediran told me he would find a way for us to meet Achebe at his hotel later in the day. That never happened. I took my manuscript back to the filing cabinet. ... During the buzz that followed Achebe's death, I read about the difficulties another Nigerian author faced with his completed Igbo translation of *Things Fall Apart*, and I became further disillusioned. (SHEME, personal interview, 2013; McCain and SHEME 21)

Now, years after Achebe's death, his legacy remains with his agents in London and New York. Although *Things Fall Apart* is often acclaimed as "the Great African novel" and part of the cultural inheritance of African writers, it is still legally administered by Western publishers and agents. SHEME, despite his literary credentials and fame in Northern Nigeria, has been unable as of 2024 to procure the rights to publish his translation.

Thus, the dream of Achebe's story being a bridge from Igbo to Hausa ran into the border-check of the "world republic of letters." SHEME's communication with Achebe as a fellow author was interrupted by officials who, despite Achebe's trenchant critiques of empty government protocols, honored Achebe more for his fame abroad than for his actual writing. Having been denied access to the author, SHEME now faces the middlemen of Euro-American literary agencies and copyright laws.

While the case of Achebe being prevented from meeting SHEME may seem the sort of government debacle that Achebe himself would have satirized, translators themselves often act as gatekeepers. In our interview, Abdullahi referred to the 2015 conference where we first met. It was hosted by the Nigerian Institute of Translators and Interpreters (NITI) and the Centre for Research in Nigerian Languages and Folklore at Bayero University, Kano. Papers at the conference focused on national development and important aspects of technical translation in media and advertising. However, despite the existence of thousands of Hausa novels, journalist Abdulaziz Abdulaziz was the only one to present a paper on the translation of contemporary Hausa prose fiction (McCain "Translation Conference").

At the conference, NITI circulated a document describing a bill they had submitted to the Nigerian National Assembly that had passed to a public hearing. According to the document, "When the bill is passed and it becomes law, it will make the practice of translation and interpretation regulated in such a way that it would be an offence for those not authorized to claim to be members of the profession to practice, exactly like in other professions: accountancy, law, medicine, engineering etc." Here

the officious language of professionalization is used, attempting to both establish translation as a respected profession like “accountancy, law, [and] medicine” and to contribute to a narrative of national development (NITI “History”). NITI seeks to solve very real problems. I have heard multiple complaints about billboards put up around Kano with ungrammatical Hausa text seemingly translated with Google translate, rather than being professionally translated.⁷ The professional association gives authority to registered translators in such scenarios, establishes standard payment structures, and engages with the educational desires of Hausa scholars who call for the translation of knowledge. Yet it also establishes hierarchies of power regarding who is allowed to communicate and how. While it may empower professional translators and interpreters, it might also discourage literary innovation and experimentation, setting up a barrier rather than a bridge.⁸

Gatekeeping also happens not just on the association, agent, or publishing level but also with the translators themselves, who are anxious about the responses of conservative audiences. Adejunmobi observes that writers writing in African languages are often constrained by what their audiences will accept (*Vernacular Palaver* 30). Most of the translators I spoke to indicated discomfort with translating certain passages for conservative audiences or told me about pushback they had received in response to their translations. Ismail Bala, a bilingual poet who has published English-language translations of Hausa poetry in the literary pages of Nigerian newspapers, recounted how his translations of love poems by Yusuf Ali Galadanci garnered him angry letters from readers who felt it was disrespectful to highlight the early love poems of a respected Islamic scholar.

The inability to find enough translators interested in contemporary Hausa literature ended one ambitious project to translate a series of Hausa novels into English. Indian publisher Blaft specializes in publishing anthologies of Indian-language popular fiction in English translation. After publisher Rakesh Khanna learned of Hausa popular literature, scholar Abdalla Uba Adamu assisted him in commissioning several translators to work on a planned series of Hausa novels in translation. In 2012, Aliyu Kamal, a professor of English at Bayero University and the author of over sixteen English-language novels, completed *Sin is a Puppy that Follows You Home*, a translation of Balaraba Ramat Yakubu’s 1990 novel *Alhaki Kuykuyo Ne*. However, when he was asked to translate Alkhamees Bature Makwarari’s *Matsayin “Lover,”* which features a sensationalistic portrayal of lesbian love in boarding schools, he resigned from the job with Blaft. His own novels portray a conservative vision of Hausa society, and he has been biting critical of the Hausa literary movement that arose in the 1980s. His novel *Hausa Girl*, for example, traces the ruinous effect of Hausa novels and films on a young girl. Kamal was not willing to play a part in promoting materials that he found immoral, even though Makwarari wrote in his preface that *Matsayin “Lover”* was written to warn audiences about these practices. While my students have enjoyed Kamal’s translation *Sin is a Puppy*, a side-by-side comparison reveals that he summarized and abridged, leaving out passages and moving chapters around. Adamu pointed out in an interview with me that Kamal was editing as he was translating. Yet he was the only translator on the project to complete a novel before resigning. Blaft ended up publishing one Hausa novel rather than a series of them.

Concern about what conservative audiences will think is no small problem. Usman Ahmad observes that abridging is common in Hausa translation and points out that translators “modify the target text through various translation techniques, like omission, addition, implicitation, or explicitation” when a “source text contradicts the beliefs of the Hausa people” (6). Scholar and translator Ibrahim Malumfashi told me in a 2013 interview that it was important to “suit the sensibilities of my readers” (personal interview). Sheme and Abdullahi both talked about the difficulties of translating passages about beer-drinking and Christianity for Hausa audiences. They took two different approaches. Sheme pointed out that while he realized that reading about Achebe’s characters drinking palm wine would be “odd” for a Muslim Hausa audience, “I didn’t try to Islamize it or Hausanize it. I am a translator, so what I did was to translate what has been conveyed” (personal interview, 2023). He used the word *giya* (beer) in Hausa to translate palm wine. Even more worrisome, though, was translating Christian theological terms:

There is a passage about the Holy Trinity. So how do you say it? How do you Hausanize it? I found that there’s no need for me to Hausanize it. I only translate it. ... There’s a place where the missionaries are trying to teach the natives about ... Jesus Christ as the son of God. ... It will sound like an abomination to a Muslim reader when you say ‘d’an Allah,’ but this is not a Hausa story. It is an Igbo story, and it’s a Christian passage. I don’t want to Islamize it ..., I translated as ‘d’an Allah’ because that’s what appeared in the text. I tried to maintain the original as much as possible. (personal interview, 2023)

Abdullahi took a slightly different approach. Regarding the beer in *The Alchemist*, “I don’t want to mention *giya* in my book because you have to think about the repercussions of the market and perception of the reader because kids are going to read the book. People might attack the translator. ... So, I didn’t translate beer as *giya*” (Abdullahi, personal interview). Instead, he thought of the Arabic word for fermented grapes used during travel and then translated that into Hausa “*tsummamen inibi*” (*Tsumammen inibi* is a direct translation of fermented [grapes]) (personal interview). This, he felt would be less offensive to his audience. Similarly, he struggled with the word for “church,” which appears in the second sentence of the novel when the shepherd Santiago seeks refuge from the rain in an abandoned church. He did not want to alienate his audience immediately, so instead of the English loan word *coci*, he decided to use a “softer” term. He used the Arabic word for church, *kanisa*, to open the text and then later used the older Hausa word *majami’a*, which translates as “meeting place” and is used for churches but can also be used for mosques. “We have to be careful,” he told me, “I don’t want to change what Paulo Coelho wanted to say, and I don’t want to provoke my readers. ... The book is not mine, but let me do it in a way that will be fair to Paulo Coelho and fair to [my readers]” (Abdullahi, personal interview).

While Sheme decided to keep a foreignizing approach to the text so that readers know that it is “an Igbo story told in the Hausa language, not an Igbo story that has been Hausanized in order to sit well with the Hausa reader” (personal interview, 2023), Abdullahi filtered Coelho’s story through Arabic loan words to make it more acceptable to Muslim readers. Notably, neither translator really took into consideration readers who might not be Muslim. When I asked Sheme if he looked at Christian Hausa writing to aid him in translating theological terms, he said he

remembered hearing Christian praise songs in Hausa, but that he did not seek out Christian translations for biblical terms because he believed that he was “competent enough to translate anything from English to Hausa” (personal interview, 2023). Likewise, Abdullahi told me that the translation of the Bible had contributed much to Hausa translation and that he had heard Bible radio programs in Hausa, but ultimately he translated with the assumption of a Muslim audience.

Question of a literary audience

Although the translators I spoke to centered their concerns on the conservatism of their immediate audiences, translator and poet Ismail Bala, who is acting as Parrésia Press’s editor for Abdullahi’s translation of *The Alchemist*, also pointed to the challenges of audiences’ aesthetic expectations of literary translation. Regarding his own translations of Hausa poetry into English, he pointed out that the literary conventions of Hausa poetry may sound simplistic to the ears of English-language readers. Similarly, when I have discussed Hausa literature and the possibility of translation with English-language publishers, some of the publishers have been cautiously interested in the idea, but one told me that what they read of the translation of Balaraba Ramat Yakubu’s novel *Sin is a Puppy that Follows You Home* was not literary enough for their publishing house. Yet “literariness” has long been defined by the values established by critics of European-language literature.

However, while there is a large Hausa reading public that has supported the rise of contemporary Hausa fiction, Bala questioned whether the readers of popular domestic and romance fiction would be interested in world literature. While he admired Abdullahi’s translation, he thought Abdullahi’s attempts to write in more formal “old Hausa” to imitate the historical setting of *The Alchemist* may not be understood or appreciated by the mass audiences Parrésia Press is trying to appeal to. Considering the financial losses faced by publishers of popular media like Gidan Dabino’s Ajami newspaper, Bala was not sure complex literary fiction would turn a financial profit.

Still, as Adejunmobi has pointed out, in any society the “stylistically innovative and thematically oppositional creative writing” (*Vernacular Palaver* 31) that attracts literary attention will draw a smaller audience than popular commercial entertainment. The answer to this challenge is not that literary fiction is unviable in African languages, but that infrastructure must be put into place to support it, as it is put into place in any language. Screenwriter and film commentator Africa Ukoh has made similar points about art film in Nigeria on Twitter: “Through years as an avid customer of video clubs, VCDs & DVDs, I saw too much diversity in interests & storytelling compression of Nigerians (within my radius of encounter) to ever believe our audience is not smart enough for X or only interested in Y”; later, he added, “What could a healthy niche market be? 10,000? 20,000? I’d say it’s realistically optimistic to say one can find 20–50k Nigerians who want Sembene. But what are the structures in place to find these people across the country over time?”

A possible way forward is illustrated by the Surreal 16 film collective, which has received attention from the gatekeepers of global cinema with multiple appearances at global film festivals and Nigeria’s backing of C. J. Obasi’s black and white art film *Mami Wata* as Nigeria’s official entry for the 2024 Academy Awards. While Surreal

16 films are often snubbed by mainstream Nigerian cinemas, the collective has since 2021 held its own annual film festival in Lagos, which caters for what filmmaker Abba Makama defined to me as an “alté audience” (personal interview). The alté audience with its literary tastes also exists among a sizable number of Hausa speakers. Similar to the Surreal 16, the Kaduna-based Open Arts literary collective, run by Sada Malumfashi and Sumayyah Ja'eh, has organized the Hausa International Book and Arts Festival since 2021 in Kaduna, Kano, and Abuja. The annual event attracts a large audience of trendy, educated young people interested in art and literature, most of whom speak English as well as they speak Hausa. Open Arts has also branched into publishing with Ibrahim Malumfashi's 2024 Hausa translation of the novel *Jerusalem* by Angolan-born Portuguese writer Goncalo M. Tavares. Open Arts literary activism indicates that translations do not need to appeal merely to monolingual audiences. The readers who will pick up Malumfashi's translation *Jarusalam* or who most enjoyed the Hausa translations included in Ankara Press's *Valentine's Day Anthology* and Jalada's translation issues likely read English as well.

At a recent Swahili conference at SOAS University of London, I met a young man who spoke to me about *Peponi*, Ida Hadjivayani's Swahili translation of Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Paradise*. Although he was an educated English-speaker living in the United Kingdom, he said that he enjoyed reading the Swahili translation more than the original English because Gurnah's story was itself a “translation” from Swahili. Reading the Swahili translation meant he did not have to do as much mental work to imagine the story from English to Swahili. The story flowed for him in the language that felt the most natural. It may be that the primary audience for *The Alchemist* and other translations of world literature into Hausa are not the mass reading publics of Hausa popular fiction but are instead the educated multilingual speakers who appreciate the literary value brought to the Hausa language by translations. The commitment to translation by publishers like Parrésia Press, Ankara Press, Open Arts, and Jalada, and the passion of translators like Mudassir Abdullahi, Ibrahim Sheme and others mentioned here, is an important first step in putting together the infrastructure needed. The greatest challenge now is making this first step financially viable.

Notes

1. The Literature Bureau became Northern Region Literature Agency (NORLA) from 1954 to 1959, and after independence it became the government publisher Northern Nigerian Publishing Company (NNPC), continuing to publish Hausa literature and translations into Hausa for a largely educational market (Furniss 35). *The Kano Chronicle* was translated from Arabic into English by H.R. Palmer in 1908 and from Arabic into Hausa as *Labarun Hausawa da Makwabtansu* by R.M. East in 1933.
2. Academic and scripture translation took a more direct approach. The first Hausa Bible translation was based on the English Revised Version, while the 1980 version was translated from the Greek and Hebrew (Gaiya 56–58). Christian translators such as Kano-based Hausa pastor Reverend Samaila Sallau continue to translate evangelical materials, such as the books of African Christian Textbooks director Luka Vandí, into Hausa.
3. One of the few Hausa novels that has been fully translated into English, without abridging, is Abubakar Tafawa Balewa's historical novel *Shaihu Umar*, translated by scholar Mervyn Hiskett.

4. See A. H. M. Kirk-Greene's 1971 review of the Hausa-Russian dictionary and six Russian texts translated into Hausa and published by Progress Publishing, and Ibrahim Yahaya's 2017 overview of literature in Niger, some of which has been translated between Hausa and French, and other dictionaries and tale collections. Stanislaw Pilaszewicz has translated Hausa poetry into Polish, and he includes a rich bibliography of scholarship in Polish, German, Russian, English, and French in his article "Literature in the Hausa Language." Ibrahim Dasuki Danbaba writes of his own translation of *Magana Jari Ce* into French and Li Chunguang lists Hausa novels such as *Magana Jari Ce*, *Ruwan Bagaja*, *Idon Matambayi*, and *Shaihu Umar* that have been translated into Chinese (22).
5. In the first chapter of his book *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa*, Ousmane Kane traces the bibliographic and translation projects of Arabic into English by scholars at institutions like the Arewa House in Kaduna and the Centre for Arabic Documentation, University of Ibadan, the Northern History Research Scheme, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and other universities. Other scholars have translated Arabic texts into Hausa such as Sidi Sayud'i Muhammad and Jean Boyd's translation of Muhammadu Bello's *Infak'ul Maisuri*.
6. Ali was also managing editor of *Jalada Africa* from 2021–2023 and is deeply committed to translation.
7. For further commentary on machine translation, see Abiodun Abosede Oshin's analysis of Google and Facebook translation of Hausa passages.
8. The bill was still before the National Assembly as of the most recent NITI conference report in October 2023 (Nzor).

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