Robert C. Newton

Writing and Publishing in National Languages Today: The Case of Bamanankan

The oral tradition continues to flourish in Mali today as it enters into new forms with the expansion of independent and affiliated radio stations, the explosion of the cassette industry, and the dramatic spread of television and videos. Yet the efforts put forward to establish literacy and literatures in the national languages since independence have yet to prove themselves sustainable. What has become apparent in the course of post-independence efforts to promote literacy and literature in national languages, is that survival is not possible without the ability and the will to envision that state which lies beyond mere survival. What needs to be developed is an environment in which national languages not only survive but blossom and bear fruit, constantly interpreting and transforming the cultural heritage from which they have grown. They need to continue to inform and to express the lives and the relations of the people in the communities of their readers and writers.

In particular, I would like to emphasize the need for the creation of national language-literatures in order to make possible the programs of functional literacy that are so needed and sought after in Mali today. Although most current projects follow the conventional wisdom in presuming the need to focus on the obvious prerequisite of literacy first; literacy and literature must develop together if either is to be successful.


After putting forward some of the arguments for the need to create national language-literatures and describing some of the current conditions and difficulties they face, I will look at the personal and working experiences of two writers currently expressing themselves in the Bamana language, Ismaila Samba Traoré and Berehima Wulale, to illustrate these points. In examining their writings, the forces that compelled them to write, and the struggles to get these publications to their readers, we can see that the development of literacy and of national language-literatures are not independent concerns in the case of Mali. What is needed for both to be successful is the creation of a general environment conducive to the use of written languages and the development of a viable publishing industry for national languages. It also becomes apparent that the need for individual initiative and courageous commitment needs to be accompanied by coordination and collaboration in the use of limited resources.

The first arguments for the necessary development of national language-literature is the need for reading materials which engage the new readers of the various literacy projects in Mali. Secondly, in order for any of the literacy campaigns to succeed, they must take place within an environment conducive to the achievement and maintenance of these skills. Such an environment must include the incentive of practical applications of national languages literacy. What is needed to establish these practical incentives is the general popularization and expansion of national languages into all domains. Although certain initiatives have been taken on the part of the media – television, radio, and especially the growing number of national languages newspapers – the government has shown more sensitivity than comprehensive planning or concrete action in regard to expanding their use in government or education. For example, all ministers and top-level administrators are required to become literate in a national language of their choice but all national identity cards are written only in French and the government and its ministers have yet to develop and implement a final plan in regard to the the expanded use of national languages in the formal school system, even after studies and evaluations of almost 15 years of national languages experimental schools.