

Speech by Djaili Amadou Amal

Closing of the International Conference of
Independent Publishers,
Pamplona-Iruñea, 26 November 2021



**INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE OF
INDEPENDENT
PUBLISHERS**

**RETHINKING...
THE BOOK OF THE FUTURE
WITH THE BIBLIODIVERSITY
AMBASSADORS!**

**Friday
26 NOVEMBER 2021
12:30-2:00PM
(UTC+1)**



Translated from the French by Allison M. Charette

This speech is also available in [audio on the Alliance's Youtube channel](#)

The Book: A Basic Necessity and Instrument of Spreading Diversity Throughout the World

In our global village overflowing with diversity, the book is without a doubt an essential, if not the most significant instrument shared by all of humanity. Books are a way for us to open ourselves to others, in the sense that they allow us to steep ourselves in the culture, morality, and values of others: to know “the other” in all their differences and uniqueness. Indeed, to know others, to know the sociological universe and cultural dimensions of others: This is surely the goal toward which all of humanity should converge, so that we can coexist in harmony and see all of humanity fulfilled and thriving. The book is a tool of dialogue and sharing, of tolerance and opening, a powerful instrument of giving and receiving—and it is thus at the very heart of humanity’s development. In this way, it clearly qualifies as a basic necessity, one to be guaranteed and subsidized in the same way as the usual list of basic staple goods (milk, sugar, flour, etc.). But it isn’t that easy. We’ve seen this in France, where books have been a normal product under capitalism until just over a year ago, when it attained the status of “essential” at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic: a new classification that was demanded by countless voices in every sector.

Now more than ever, as our world is disintegrating in the grip of ignorance, obscurantism, and the temptation to build walls, it is just as important to get enough calcium and carbohydrates to grow up healthily as it is to educate yourself, so as to not endanger yourself and others. In a world that is ever more complex and confusing, culture—and thus, the book—is indispensable, simply essential. Culture is what feeds the mind, what builds the human being.

In a rational world—at its heart, a place where we work together toward the best and most essential part of humanity, which is to say humanity itself—we will understand that books can be anything and everything *except* for a lowly product subjected only to the laws of the capitalist market, which has as its unipolar aim the goals of concentration and domination, and the monopoly that such goals engender. If books are prone to the singular logic of capitalism, abandoned to the highest bidders, subject to sales and profits, it only alienates its very essence, the fundamental value it holds, and its very reason for being: that is to say, diversity. A publishing house that controls the whole book market will not be concerned with the color of its books or the geographic origin of its texts, nor any educational interests, but rather the financial profit the books can bring, which is grafted onto the stakeholders who dictate the business’ monochromatic objectives. Yet, since the market is not infinite, all domination is at the cost of smaller players, which consequently leads to the restriction or annihilation of other, alternate voices. If these voices are unable to exist, they disappear—and with them, a legitimate and necessary part of the diversity that they were bringing to the concert of nations for the edification of an open and tolerant humankind, one that is at peace and attentive to its own needs.

More than ever, the future of the book—namely its diversity and promotion of minority and alternative voices—rests on the shoulders of independent editors, who give life to the book’s cultural necessity through their commitment, convictions, and attachment to causes that break with the lone dictatorship of capitalism. An independent publisher often focuses on editorial lines that have been neglected—not for being considered less important, but less profitable, as the target readership appears reduced. The International Alliance of Independent Publishers plays an important part in this, through the networking of socially-minded actors, the spreading of knowledge, and the mutual sharing of tools

and resources, all of which allow for alternative, solidarity-minded editorial projects to be established.

As a writer, I published my first three books in Cameroon, with Editions Ifrikiya and Editions Proximité, both members of the Alliance. I am pleased to recount that my very first novel, *Walaande ; l'art de partager un mari (The Art of Sharing a Husband)*, which came out in 2010, was awarded a prize through the Alliance, thanks to the support of the Prince Claus Fund. This gave the book its first international translation, into Arabic. There are precious few other ways in which it could have achieved such a thing from Cameroon, with such an immediate and horizon-opening impact that it had for me. My third novel, *Munyal ; les larmes de la patience* (forthcoming in English translation in October 2022 as *The Impatients*), is now available in many Francophone African countries because of the Alliance's "Terres solidaires" collection. Many African authors feature on that list, but the part that brings me the most pride is to have such a recognition from Sub-Saharan Africa, where I live and work. This is truly the spirit of diversity that is so dear to the Alliance, and what represents the values that we writers and editors must defend and promote. The Alliance plays such a fundamental role in this sense, mitigating as much as possible the issue of book distribution in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Francophone countries. Thanks to this solidarity-minded principle of co-publishing, the price of books is reduced, making them accessible and competitive—when books published in Europe are reaching the local markets at exorbitant prices that are virtually inaccessible even for the so-called middle class.

Speaking of this last novel, *Munyal ; les larmes de la patience*, I'd like to briefly mention its journey from a Cameroonian publisher to a publisher in France. This opportunity materialized when the novel received the Prix Orange du Livre en Afrique (the Orange Prize for a Book in Africa) in 2019. I was informed enough to keep the Sub-Saharan rights with Editions Proximité in Cameroon, which allowed the book to continue to be distributed in the countries in that region at an affordable price. Just like *Walaande*, which had entered the curriculum for Anglophone secondary students, *Munyal* has now been assigned for the final year of Francophone secondary schools.

In that vein, I think that co-publishing is an attractive endeavor that is worth pursuing. Writers who publish in the Global North should start leaning toward this option, by encouraging their European publishers to set up partnerships with African publishers. By facilitating such collaborations, we can help to limit the price of books in African countries, which will stimulate a higher circulation. I am excited—and rightly so—to see that this initiative is gaining followers, and that more and more authors are starting to follow this model.

I say this with full knowledge that the emancipation of African publishing houses will also happen as this style of co-publishing is further developed, as it is profitable for all involved parties, driven by communal causes founded on values of diversity and sharing books. We should see the book market in Francophone Africa become progressively more balanced in favor of local publishers, in a continual cycle of fulfillment that will make them more economically dynamic and productive.

On that note, I cannot neglect to mention the question of books written in the so-called minority African languages. I have often been asked why I don't write in Fula, my native language. Let's see, now: What would be the point of that, with how our societies are set up today? To write a book in Fula, the writer must choose between the Latin and Arabic alphabets. The target audience would be the Fula communities in the Sahel regions, who

would have to have a grasp of one of the two alphabets. So, we would need a literate readership, capable of reading the work in their country's national languages. By writing a book in Fula, we would actually be communitizing it—and by doing so, we would be excluding significant parts of the national reading audience, as our societies are predominantly diverse ethnicities who have been rather partitioned off by cultural barriers. The real question for a writer is, above all: Who are we writing for? If we are writing for a diverse readership, with strong connections to the themes that we intend to address through our work, then it's better for us to find the most unifying way of transmitting our text, to give ourselves the greatest chance to reach the highest number of writers. Literature in our African countries is inextricably tied up in languages, the instruments of education—which in Cameroon are mainly French and English. One of the preliminary solutions, then, is the promotion of these so-called communal languages by integrating them into the educational system. As a writer, I have always thought in Fula, my language, and written in French, the language of my academic education. In a certain sense, then, my writing is itself a process of translation, from the oral Fula to the written French.

I do appreciate, however, that we must encourage the initiatives of translating works into local languages, in the same way as the “larger” languages into which books are more readily translated. This is primarily from the desire to do as much as possible to keep these languages alive, and to make texts available to keep them viable. *Walaande ; l'art de partager un mari* was translated into Wolof and is available on the Senegalese market in a bilingual French-Wolof edition. This path should be explored and cultivated, as it undoubtedly constitutes an additional pleasure for the Wolof readership.

Another aspect of the question of diversity is that of the discriminations that women are subjected to in the world of publishing, and the lack of recognition that women receive. How can we speak of this issue without associating it with the more general question of discrimination against women in our society, especially the entrepreneurial world, where women struggle to be respected for their professional performance and merit? We saw earlier this year—and perhaps it was just random happenstance, I'm not sure—that out of all the Nobel Prizes, there was only one woman laureate, for the Nobel Peace Prize, which even then was shared with a man. And perhaps the problem is even more alarming in the publishing sector? I don't know, without specific statistics to get a clearer idea. But whatever the data, we must take as our starting point that this is a widespread general problem, and that there are good reasons to resolve this problem in all of its multiple dimensions.

For this, as we well know, we will need voluntarist and egalitarian policies—not based on the regressive idea suggesting that women are less competitive than men, but rather that by giving women the same opportunities as men, by creating conditions such that women do not suffer from the obstacles and handicaps which they are arbitrarily subjected to on a daily basis, that they can excel and perform to just as high of a degree as their male counterparts. As in all unequal societies in which dominant forces dictate separateness, women are always and forever called upon to keep fighting the fight that has been imposed on them, at every level, to forever overcome the injustices that still leech away their social and professional odysseys. In order to do this, we must identify the scope of this problem in the book world, according to the schemas and equations offered by our societies across the globe, and draw up appropriate strategic mechanisms to minimize or even overcome this unacceptable facet of humankind.

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