

DIGITAL HORIZONS: REVITALISING AFRICA'S INDIGENOUS TONGUES IN THE SILICON AGE

Fulufhelo Oscar Makananise and Shumani Eric Madima (Eds.) *Digital Media and the Preservation of Indigenous Languages in Africa: Toward a Digitalized and Sustainable Society* Lexington Books / Bloomsbury Academic, 2024. 312 pp. ISBN 9781666957532.

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This article is a critical review of a book titled *Digital Media and the Preservation of Indigenous Languages in Africa: Toward a Digitalized and Sustainable Society*, edited by Fulufhelo Oscar Makananise and Shumani Eric Madima.

Keywords: Digital media, indigenous languages, Africa; decoloniality, epistemic justice, Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), linguistic preservation, digital colonialism, orality, social media

In the whirlwind of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), where algorithms and apps relentlessly redefine human connection, the fate of Africa's Indigenous languages hangs in a precarious and poignant balance. They stand at a digital crossroads, facing the dual threats of global linguistic homogenization and the existential risk of being rendered obsolete in the very mediums that shape modern consciousness. It is into this fraught and urgent fray that *Digital Media and the Preservation of Indigenous Languages in Africa: Toward a Digitalized and Sustainable Society*, deftly edited by Fulufhelo Oscar Makananise and Shumani Eric Madima, makes its timely and critical intervention. This ambitious collection assembles a powerful chorus of African scholars from diverse corners of the continent to dissect a central paradox of our time: how digital tools can either bury these languages under the weight of a globalised English or hoist them into vibrant, interactive, and sustainable life.

This volume joins a burgeoning scholarly conversation on the role of digital technologies in indigenous language revitalisation, which has gained momentum in recent years amid growing concerns over linguistic endangerment in the Global South. Works such as explorations of social media's potential for promoting languages like Setswana and Punjabi (Minhas & Salawu, 2024a) or Wikipedia's capacity to document and transmit cultural heritage through low-resource languages highlight the democratizing promise of online platforms (Minhas & Salawu, 2024b). Similarly, studies on technological strategies for South African indigenous tongues and the integration of African languages in digital media interactions underscore grassroots innovations (Mlambo & Matfunjwa, 2024). Yet, Makananise and Madima's collection distinguishes itself by centering a decolonial lens, critiquing "digital colonialism" as an extension of historical inequities and advocating for African-centred epistemologies to reclaim digital spaces—thus advancing the discourse toward more equitable, context-specific frameworks for linguistic survival.

The editors anchor their work at the complex nexus of language survival, technological disruption, and epistemic equity. Fulufhelo Oscar Makananise, an Associate Professor of Media Studies at the University of South Africa and an NRF-rated researcher with over a decade of expertise in decolonial media practices, digital communication, and indigenous knowledge systems, holds a PhD in Media and Communications from the University of Limpopo. His prior works, including co-editing *Decolonising Digital Media and Indigenisation of Participatory Epistemologies* (2024), demonstrate his deep commitment to dismantling colonial legacies in technological spheres. Complementing this, Shumani Eric Madima, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English, Media Studies, and Linguistics at the University of Venda with a PhD in Linguistics, specialises in African language preservation, epistemic indigenisation, and the interplay of orality and digital narratives. His research on linguistic revitalisation in postcolonial contexts, including contributions to legislative language policies in South Africa, equips him uniquely to guide this interdisciplinary endeavour. Together, their credentials as scholar-activists with rooted experience in African academia and community-engaged research lend authoritative weight to the volume's call for transformative action. Their core argument, which resonates throughout the volume, is both simple and revolutionary: Africa's Indigenous tongues cannot endure on folklore, ceremonial use, and pedagogical goodwill alone. To claim their stake in the 21st century and beyond, they must actively infiltrate the digital realm—the domain where knowledge is now created,

validated, and disseminated. This means envisioning and building a world where algorithms can "speak" Tshivenda, TikTok trends unfold in Yoruba, and AI chatbots are fluent in the nuanced registers of isiZulu. Absent this digital vitality, centuries of encoded wisdom, cultural nuance, and unique worldviews risk not just physical decay but a more profound digital oblivion, silenced in the archives of the future.

Architectural Cohesion and Continental Reach

The book's intellectual journey is thoughtfully structured across four purposeful sections, creating a logical progression from foundational theoretical critique to hands-on, grassroots tactics. *Part I: Digital Preservation, Epistemic African Knowledges and the Fourth Industrial Revolution* lays the indispensable theoretical groundwork. The contributors here wield decolonial and postcolonial lenses to expose how the current hegemony of English online is not a neutral technological outcome but a direct echo of colonial histories—a form of "digital colonialism" that systematically sidelines African epistemologies. These chapters powerfully argue that the very architecture of our digital platforms, often built on Western individualistic and text-centric models, needs a fundamental redesign to honour Indigenous ways of knowing, which are often rooted in relational ontologies, orality, and communal storytelling.

Part II: Digital Media Strategies and Indigenous Language Preservation in the Age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution marks a crucial shift from diagnosis to action. It spotlights a range of real-world initiatives that serve as beacons of possibility. Here, we encounter detailed case studies of app-based language learning tools designed for rural schools with limited resources, crowdsourced digital translation hubs that empower communities to build their own lexicons, and ingenious SMS-driven folklore archives that preserve oral histories using basic mobile technology. These vignettes collectively demonstrate that technology is not a monolithic, top-down force but a malleable ally in revival efforts, capable of being adapted to local contexts and needs—as one chapter asserts, by employing contemporary practices and strategies to document, protect, and preserve ways of being that have formerly been relegated to the periphery.

The focus sharpens further in *Part III: Endangered Language Revitalisation, Social Media Language Prospects and Media Training*, which zooms in on the organic, ground-level repurposing of platforms by everyday users. A standout chapter offers a fascinating semiotic decoding of emoji-infused chats among Shona and Ndebele communities on WhatsApp, revealing how custom digital stickers and code-switching become sly, sophisticated vessels for cultural nuance. In these spaces, mundane messaging transforms into an act of subtle resistance and cultural affirmation, proving that preservation happens as much in daily digital interaction as in formal archives.

Finally, *Part IV: Orality on Social Media, Indigenous Epistemic Cultures and Minority Languages in Digital Media* probes one of the most fertile intersections: the fusion of ancient orality with the logic of viral social feeds. This section brilliantly articulates how platforms like TikTok, with their inherent emphasis on rhythm, vocal inflection, and embodied performance, are uniquely suited to revive African oral and performative traditions. It celebrates the ways minority tongues are finding new life and global audiences through short-form videos, live-streamed storytelling, and participatory dance challenges, turning the ephemeral into the enduring.

Standout Virtues and Decolonial Imperatives

At its heart, this volume's greatest strength lies in its powerful reframing of Indigenous languages. They are presented not as quaint relics for anthropological study or museum-piece preservation, but as dynamic epistemic powerhouses essential for a pluralistic future. The introduction by Makananise and Madima masterfully casts these languages as the linchpins for upending oppressive digital knowledge economies, urging a decisive shift from extractive data relationships to equitable co-creation: "integrate digital technologies into their lives to foster innovation" while advancing "the documentation and preservation of underrepresented languages, and promote African-centred epistemologies." The contributors build on this foundation, consistently portraying the digital realm as a contemporary battlefield where linguistic hierarchies can either harden or shatter. This is illustrated through sharp contrasts, such as the bias of mainstream algorithms toward high-resource European languages versus the community-led "hacks" that democratize data and reclaim digital space.

The interdisciplinary flair of the collection is another dazzling virtue. Linguistics rubs shoulders with critical media theory, anthropology with radical pedagogy, yielding a heady and productive mix of armchair philosophy and gritty fieldwork. The case studies—ranging from analyses of viral language memes to accounts of journalist bootcamps training community reporters in digital storytelling—effectively bridge the ivory tower and the village square. This makes the book equally appealing to scholars in linguistics and media studies, policymakers shaping cultural heritage and language policies, educators developing digital curricula for language programs, and on-the-ground activists driving community-led digital decolonization efforts.

Methodologically, the book shines by consciously elevating users from passive consumers to co-architects of their own linguistic preservation. It consistently spotlights bottom-up ingenuity: volunteer-driven apps for participatory dialect mapping, social media challenges that gamify complex grammar rules, and user-generated content that circulates Indigenous slang. This participatory ethos echoes core decolonial imperatives, flipping the script from narratives of elite-led salvation to the empowering practice of collective agency.

Points of Contention and Untapped Frontiers

As with any ambitious anthology, some cracks inevitably appear in the mosaic. The empirical depth varies across the contributions. While entries focusing on South Africa, for instance, often ground their digital debates in the gritty realities of post-apartheid language policy and infrastructure, some of the broader continental overviews occasionally veer toward abstraction, reading more as compelling manifestos than as detailed roadmaps. A tighter, more demanding editorial hand might have ironed out these uneven paces.

Furthermore, while acknowledged, the treatment of profound access barriers—sky-high data tariffs, chronically spotty broadband, and the simple scarcity of affordable smart devices—feels at times like a necessary nod rather than a deep, structural dive. In Africa's starkly uneven digital quilt, these are not mere footnotes; they are fundamental fault lines that dictate who gets to participate in this digital revival, who gets to "go viral" in their mother tongue, and who remains on the silenced margins.

Finally, while the book rightly situates itself in the context of the 4IR, its engagement with the most cutting-edge and thorny frontier—Artificial Intelligence—remains somewhat tentative. With tools like large language models and neural machine translation either gobbling up low-resource languages for training data without reciprocity or spitting them out garbled and inaccurate, a dedicated probe into the ethics, possibilities, and perils of AI for African linguistics would have supercharged the book's immediate relevance. Nonetheless, it powerfully plants the seeds for such essential future explorations.

References

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