

SHARE YOUR AFRICAN KNOWLEDGE

November 9, 2011 in [External](#), [Featured Project](#)

The following guest post is by **Iolanda Pensa**, the scientific director at WikiAfrica and Share You Knowledge.



What about African knowledge?

Where is it? Who has it? And *what* is African knowledge anyway?

Defining “African knowledge” is so difficult that it probably takes less time to share it. Talking about African knowledge is to talk about a wide range of controversial issues. Colonial history, diaspora, migrations, borders, restitutions, power dynamics, the way the African continent is (not) represented, the possibility for African pupils to [access books and educational materials](#), the chance for all pupils to access information, and our capacity to build a common knowledge that contemplates all points of view in a neutral way. I often like to think of the British-Indian-Pakistani artist and intellectual Rasheed Araeen who joined the Black Panthers in the Seventies because at the time – and I’m surely going to say it in an over-simplistic way – it represented fighting for power and freedom.

When we talk about African knowledge everybody is concerned. We are talking about the collections of world museums, about the world population, and even about the coltan inside the computer I’m using right now. Sharing African knowledge is something everybody can contribute to. And – great news – we have two tools that already facilitate the job: Creative Commons and Wikipedia.

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In 2006 the [lettera27 foundation](#) launched the project [WikiAfrica](#). The mission of lettera27 is to support education, literacy, and access to knowledge all over the world – but in particular in the most disadvantaged areas. Africa is the continent with the lowest literacy rate: it is the least connected and the least represented on the Internet. Wikipedia is THE contemporary source of information, it is the world's biggest non-profit non-organisation and an incredibly powerful educational tool. Contributing to Wikipedia requires a specific literacy and it produces international multilingual anonymous mainstream (but negotiable) knowledge.



WikiAfrica, Kër Thioossane, Dakar, 2008

After supporting research projects, presentations and training, at the end of 2009 lettera27 decided to produce 30,000 African contributions to Wikipedia by 2012. To achieve the goal WikiAfrica focuses on cultural institutions. Museums, NGOs, foundations, festivals, research institutes and publishers have archives, collections, biographies and film descriptions they can share on Wikipedia and Wikimedia projects. They are valuable first points-of-contact – they can involve their staff, collaborators and public to use their contents to enrich the online encyclopedia, and they are interested in reaching a wide audience and make their contents more accessible (as we've already found out).



We wanted to involve African institutions immediately, but it was not easy. There are Creative Commons guidelines for individuals but not really for small and medium- sized cultural institutions with an heterogeneous documentation. Same problem with Wikipedia: “no problem” if you want to upload a large amount of public domain images but quite some troubles if you have a little of this and a little of that. How can you figure out which documentation belongs to you as an institution? Who can take the decision to adopt the CC BY-SA license in a museum? How can an NGO produce an agreement with its collaborators that allows it to use their images and publish them on wikimedia commons?

So in January 2011 we started Share Your Knowledge. An initial pilot phase would include 10 institutions, expanding to 50 by 2012. The institutions (museums, research centres, archives, festivals, foundations, publishers, organisations working on cooperation and development) are asked to contribute to the [GLAM project](#); to specify a number of items they will make available with a CC BY-SA license (or in the public domain) and with which they will contribute to WikiAfrica; and to sign a letter in which they express their support of knowledge-sharing.

All this is done in collaboration with a lot of people and institutions. [Wikimedia Italia](#) has been contributing to WikiAfrica since 2006, the [Africa Centre](#) based in Cape Town became a main partner in January 2011, and the [NEXA Center for Internet and Society](#) at Politecnico di Torino and the [Cariplo Foundation](#) joined Share Your Knowledge in 2011, along with all the other institutions which we need to thank and which you can find listed [here](#). We also benefit from the work of two tutors, two lawyers, a wikipedian in residence, a wide number of wikimedian and wikipedian volunteers, and the expertise of a team of external evaluators and people that just pass by and help.

We are looking forward to starting collaboration with a wikipedian in residence at the [Africa Centre](#), which is financing a call for a [one-year reimbursed collaborator focussed on Africanizing Wikipedia](#).

lettera27 is the 27th letter of the alphabet, the missing letter, the letter yet to be, the hybrid sign, the empty box, the link between oral and written words, the connection to the future, the intersection of analog and digital. <http://www.lettera27.org/>



Frédéric Keiff, L'Arbre à Palabre à Douala, 2007, produced by doual'art. This image of Frédéric Keiff is in cc by-sa as a contribution to WikiAfrica and to the work of doual'art. Like Wikipedia L'Arbre à Palabre is a place of knowledge production and discussion.

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