



Speech by French Ambassador to Tanzania
Jacques CHAMPAGNE de LABRIOLLE
For the launching of the Book
“Mwana Mdogo wa Mfalme”
Alliance Française de Dar es Salaam
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Waheshimiwa wageni,
Mheshimiwa Walter,
Dear friends,

I am very pleased to welcome you all here at Alliance Française de Dar es Salaam, for this exciting moment of the launching of an outstanding book, “Mwana Mdogo wa Mfalme”, which is the swahili version of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s masterwork, “*Le Petit Prince*”.

This launching is a great moment, because this book is a great book. And a very special one. It was first published 67 years ago, in 1943, right in the midst of World War II, and since, it has become a **genuine international cult-book** : it has now sold more than 80 million copies, which makes it the biggest French best seller ever, the second biggest selling book in French language (after the Bible), and one of the best selling books ever on this planet.

Over the years, *Le Petit Prince* has been translated hundreds of times, in about 180 different languages and dialects of the world : from English, as soon as 1943, to a language called Zazaki in 2009 (NB : it is a Kurdish dialect). Up to now, it was already translated in several African languages : Afrikaans, Tamashek, Amharic, Bambara, Sesotho, Xhosa, Zulu, and of course Arabic (there are at least 12 different translations in Arabic). It was certainly a long due must to have it in Swahili, as Swahili is quickly becoming *the* most important African language ! I really felt we had to do something about it ! Now it is done, as Walter Bgoya has just explained us, and this is a great moment.

Now, why is this small book, understood as a children book, so widely read in the world? How can we explain such a huge success? I think it is worth taking some time to think about it.

When a book meets such a wide audience, it must be because it has, at the same time, something that is universal, something that is timeless, and something that speaks directly to the soul of each one of the millions of readers.

It must also be because the book is well written : this one is indeed written in beautiful French : a very natural French which looks clear and simple, but which in fact is not so “simple”, and, as Walter has just explained, it can prove to be rather difficult to translate. The *words* are simple, but the *style* is not simple by any means (like with Jean de La Fontaine). As for me, I believe that this French language would probably be better described as “pure” and “classical”.

The story is a plain and poetic one, full of fantasy and good humour, but not without moments of gravity – as usually goes with a good fairy tale. It is the tale of a quest by the Little Prince, who is living somewhere in galactic space, on a very small planet :he has decided to travel in space, from planet to planet, **looking for what is essential in life.**

There in space, he meets with a number of people who all believe that they know what is essential in life. But the Little Prince soon realizes that they are very ignorant, very narrow minded, and very stubborn. These characters are the ridiculous **king** (who in fact is alone and wants the Prince to be his first subject), the **self-conceited** (who believes that the Prince is an admirer), the **drunkard** (who drinks to forget that he drinks), the **businessman**, the **lamplighter**, and the **geographer**. These are people who believe that they know what is important in life, but actually miss it.

Through portraying these characters, Saint-Exupéry wanted to capture and describe the contradictions and limitations of our society. As the Little Prince meets with these various characters, he can only be surprised and disappointed, because these people, however important they believe they are, have nothing useful and universal to say.

As a number of my friends do know, I have a special taste for the geographer. As a geographer, he should know a lot about his own planet, but in fact he does not know anything : why ? Because he never leaves his office ! He says “**Mimi ni mtaalam wa jioografia, lakini si mgunduzi**” (I am a geographer, I am not an explorer). Anyone with any knowledge of bureaucracy has already met this one!

When he finally arrives to the Earth, the Little Prince finds himself in the Sahara Desert; he meets with an aviator who has crashed in the desert, and is trying to repair his plane. This is when the Little Prince says the famous cult-phrase “**Tafadhali, nichoree kondoo**” (“S’il vous plait, dessine-moi un mouton”). Though the book is not about the author’s life, this is definitely an autobiographic element : Antoine de Saint-Exupéry was himself a famous aviator, who pioneered in the opening of airlines between Europe, Africa and Latin America, and he himself has crashed in the middle of the desert, in Libya in 1936.

What eventually emerges of the Prince’s quest and experience is a series of profound observations about human nature, about the value of understanding, of friendship, and of love. In short, about the **meaning of life**. They are summed up in the famous “simple secret” that, at the end of the book, the fox shares with

the Prince : (**"Ni siri rahisi sana : huwezi kuona kikwelikweli ila kwa moyo : ya maana hayaonekani kwa macho**). "We only see well with the heart. The most important things can't be seen with the eyes".

As a matter of fact, *Le Petit Prince* is very much **like an African folktale** : it can be read and understood at several different levels : the story may look simple at first sight, and can be enjoyed at a first degree; but in fact, if you read it again and again, and/or if you are properly explained, you will realize that there is a much deeper thinking and meaning behind it. This is why *Le Petit Prince* is much more than a book for children ; while reading it, you will soon have a spontaneous feeling that this book tells us about what really matters in life ; it tells us that love, wisdom, happiness, friendship, all follow the same lines, which you will know easily if you keep the right kind of spirit ; and the right kind of spirit is closer to the spirit of childhood, to the soul of the Little Prince, than to the stubborn mind of so many adults.

This message was particularly relevant when the book was written, in the middle of WWII, at a time when all moral values had collapsed in western Europe. This book was then a **message against political and moral despair, against social passiveness, against blind and gregarious behaviour. It was a message of faith in mankind, a message of individual and collective hope, a message of political will.** It was then, and it is still now.

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For many years now, it has been French policy to promote the idea that **culture is much more important for peace and development than most people usually realize.** We believe that cultural diversity is a vital component of social development in this global world. By supporting the translation into Swahili of a book which is one of the most famous of the French literature, we wish of course to deliver a message of friendship and understanding. We also want to help the people who read only in swahili to have access to a cultural message which was meant for everybody, including them. And we want to take advantage of swahili's tremendous capacity to be the vehicle of messages with a universal scope and a global reach.

We also strongly hope that making such a book available to the general public will contribute to reinforce reading and debating habits, here in Tanzania and in the whole of the Swahili speaking region.

We are confident that Tanzanian authorities in the education and cultural fields will support a broad circulation of the book, among schools, universities, libraries and bookshops.

Finally, I would like to express our sincere gratitude to French publisher "Editions Gallimard", who have renounced part of their translation rights, and to the "Saint Exupéry Succession" Association, who has also been very helpful by providing the informative exhibition that you can see tonight.

I would also like to thank Agnes Blasselle and Cécile Germain, for their strong involvement in the organisation of this event, as well as all our friends of Alliance Française.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Walter Bgoya, for his dedication in this project, for the high quality of his contribution to the translation, and for the dynamic involvement of Mkuki wa Nyota in publishing the book.

We strongly hope that this Swahili version of the book will get the success it deserves.

Now I would like to invite you all to discover the exhibition, which includes panels about the drawings of the book (which are by Saint-Exupéry himself), and drawings made by the primary pupils of the French School Arthur Rimbaud, as well as paintings made during a special workshop led by Tanzanian painter Ernest Mtaya.

KARIBUNI, NA ASANTENI SANA KWA KUNISIKILIZA.