

Nervous Conditions: On translating one of Zimbabwe's most famous novels into Shona

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22 Feb 2024

The publishing journey of Zimbabwean writer and film-maker [Tsitsi Dangarembga's](#) *Nervous Conditions* wasn't easy. Yet the novel is today considered by many as one of [Africa's 100 best books](#) of the 20th century and is studied at [universities](#) around the world.



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When she submitted the manuscript to publishing houses in Zimbabwe in the early 1980s, they all turned it down. Dangarembga felt [at the time](#) that it was “very difficult for men to accept the things that women write and want to write about: and the men (were) the publishers”. It was eventually published to critical acclaim in 1988 by [The Women's Press](#) in London.

This made Dangarembga the first black Zimbabwean woman to publish a novel in English. Now a new translation of the book into Zimbabwe's [Shona](#) language has been released, marking another milestone for *Nervous Conditions*, because African classics are seldom translated into African languages. Translation of African literature happens often, but mostly in European countries. *Nervous Conditions* itself has [already been translated](#) into a dozen or more languages including Dutch, French, German, Italian and Spanish.

The new Shona translation, titled *Kusagadzikana* and released by Zimbabwean publishers [House of Books](#), was done by [Ignatius Mabasa](#), an acclaimed novelist who also wrote the first [PhD thesis in Shona](#).

Even more remarkably, Dangarembga's follow-up novel, *The Book of Not*, has also recently been translated into Shona as *Hakuna Zvakadaro* by writer and academic [Tanaka Chidora](#). This leaves just the last book in the trilogy, [the Booker shortlisted This Mournable Body](#), untranslated. For a reader and [scholar](#) of Zimbabwean literature, encountering *Nervous Conditions*'s story of a rural girl called Tambudzai in Shona is like waking up in a dream. I spoke with Mabasa about his translation journey and why it matters.

Can you describe the process of translating the book?

I started translating *Nervous Conditions* around 1999 when I was a visiting Fulbright scholar in the US, where I was

teaching Zimbabwean literature. *Nervous Conditions* was one of the books I was teaching. Coincidentally, 1999 is the year that my first novel [Mapenzi](#) was published and I used to talk to my students about the sad situation that there was more Zimbabwean literature in English than in indigenous languages. I pointed out that the majority of the ordinary women whose story *Nervous Conditions* was telling would not be able to buy, read and understand *Nervous Conditions* in English, because of their literacy levels.

I thought perhaps I could try to translate the book into Shona as a way of repatriating and decolonising the story. I then dived in and started translating the first chapter, tackling one paragraph at a time. I was intrigued by how beautiful and sincere the story sounded in Shona. Tambudzai sounded more heartfelt in Shona than in English – I guess because Shona was her real voice. As someone who grew up in a village myself, I strongly identified with Tambudzai and, in translating, I faithfully became her in order to capture the pain and injustice in her family and the national politics in the story. I translated the book up to chapter three and had to stop because Dangarembga was involved in a [legal battle](#) for its rights. I only resumed in 2022, but because I had lost the mood and feeling that I had when I initially started, I had to rework the translation from the beginning.

Were there difficult parts and how did you deal with them?

The title was one of the most difficult things to translate. Nervousness is something deeper, it's beyond nerves. It's a reflection of the physical, the psychological and the spiritual. The level of disturbance in *Nervous Conditions* is traumatic, immediate and long-term. I had to think really hard about the words that would capture all that. I'm pleased with Kusagadzikana as the final title because when I read Tanaka Chidora's Shona translation of *The Book of Not*, I noticed that he uses the term *kusagadzikana* the same way I did. Another difficulty I faced was to do with the differences in the storytelling style of the two languages, English and Shona.

Dangarembga does go into the human psyche in a complex and deep manner that is not usually found in Shona writing, and that needed to be handled delicately – there were times when it was like deboning a fish. An example is Tambudzai's trauma caused by Babamukuru's facilitated wedding of her parents. Also Nyasha's emotional rollercoasters are key to the story – I had to slow down and make sure that I didn't miss the metaphorically loaded twists and turns. Then there are some very English descriptions including elaborate colours, ways of dancing, fashion designs, foods that I had to deal with cleverly but without aborting the meaning.

Why was it important for you to translate this book?

Nervous Conditions is our story as indigenous people. The story had to be decolonised by making it come back to speak to the people who are victims of colonial injustices in a language that would enable them to tell “when the rain started to beat them” (as the saying goes) in order for them to start drying themselves. The novel is an important documentation of our history and the translation makes it accessible and able to be discussed under a tree by ordinary folk, and not just by academics in air-conditioned conference venues. It is a form of liberation struggle – the liberation of many things that remain colonised, including our minds. *The Conversation* under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

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