

The Inferior Stone in the Language Hearth: The Quest for Recognition of Indigenous African Languages in the Global Arena

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Introduction

Language is a factor that can either provide or withhold access to education and therefore to a people's development (Pattanayak 5). This is because it is a key to communication and, consequently, to knowledge in society. Language indeed is a vital human attribute that enables people to learn, think creatively and change socially. Despite the significant role that language plays in human development, there are many world languages that have been marginalized for a long time and are yet to take their rightful place in the global arena. In fact fewer than 500 of the world's 6,800 languages are used and taught in schools (Hornberger 1). Furthermore, over 3,400 of these languages are predicted to be at risk of extinction by the end of the 21st century. Such languages have not been developed, described nor do they have a standardized orthography.

As recognized by the World Conference on Education for All (Wolff 5), language policy and planning in world states should begin by looking at the role played by local languages in the lives of the people. This is purely because indigenous languages carry with them a wealth of knowledge about the local ecosystem and act as a "repository of a polity's history, traditions, arts and ideas" (Kamwangamalu 136). When a language is lost, much more is lost than just its basic function as a tool of expression. There is, therefore, need for revitalization of marginalized languages, bringing all of them forward so that they too can play a vital role in the global village, because every one of the world's languages is unique and invaluable.

Over a third of the world's marginalized languages are found in Africa (Skuttnab-Kangas 33) and this is hampering Africa's quest for scientific and technological development. The linguistic disadvantages suffered by Africans who do not speak "the so-called powerful languages" must be addressed as a matter of urgency (Okombo 1). Indeed in the African setting, indigenous languages are disadvantaged as far as allocation of communicative functions of different categories of languages (official, national and local) in the society is concerned. Arguably, indigenous African languages are the inferior stones in the language hearth, where ex-colonial languages seem to be occupying a superior position while the indigenous languages are relegated to an inferior spot.

Using Kenya as a reference, this paper discusses the language situation in an African setting. It highlights the imbalances in status and functions of different language categories in the country and explains why indigenous African languages continue to be marginalized. The paper also argues for the need to preserve, promote and develop these indigenous languages, and concludes by pointing out the way forward for Kenya to address equitability of all languages within her sociolinguistic environment.

¹ I would like to thank the following institutions for their assistance: Scholars Rescue Fund, Kenyatta University, University of Pennsylvania, Yale Program in African Languages.

The Language Situation in Africa

Africa is highly multilingual, with over 2,011 different languages being spoken in the continent (Skutnabb-Kangas 33). Nevertheless, the dominant languages in post-independent Africa have remained the ex-colonial codes: English, French and Portuguese. These languages continue to be used as the official media in education, mass communication, commerce, the judiciary, and political administration in Africa. In almost all African states, the ex-colonial languages are the privileged official codes. Ironically, as Wolff (7) notes, in much of Africa, some 90% of the people have no knowledge of the official language of their country, even though this ex-colonial language is presumed to be the vehicle of communication between governments and citizens. This in itself is a barrier to effective communication between the ruling class and the citizens, hence the problem in terms of involving the latter in national development. The majority of Africans are thus denied an opportunity to participate creatively and significantly in development activities, ultimately denying nations a chance to grow at a rate that can enable them to provide for the needs of their citizens.

In Nigeria, for example, English is spoken by less than 20% of the country's population, yet the language dominates the Nigerian way of life. With over 400 languages spoken by the population (Bamgbose 68), Nigeria still uses the ex-colonial language as the official language of business, commerce, administration and education. Clearly, English in Nigeria (and elsewhere in Africa) is perceived to be of a higher status and greater usefulness, and is considered to be the language that is instrumental to economic and social development. Indigenous languages have only limited use in the school system, media and in conducting government business. Thus with time, the population develops certain attitudes towards the different languages within their linguistic repertoire.

A number of scholars have argued that continued use of ex-colonial languages is the main stumbling block for the growth and use of indigenous languages in former colonies of Africa (Bamgbose 11; Musau 162; Pattanayak 5). Pattanayak (5), for instance, argues that the use of these languages inhibits the interaction of indigenous languages with science, impedes the generation of appropriate technology and creates an educated elite committed to pursuing the lifestyles of the former colonizers. Commenting on the behavior of the African elite, Fanon, as cited in Gendzie (47), observes that the elitist trains his children at home to speak and perfect the ex-colonial language and to assume the privileges of the culture that this language offers. In the process, he may instill in the children a sense of shame towards the indigenous language, thus contributing to negative attitudes towards their own mother tongue. The use of complex ex-colonial languages in Africa to transmit scientific and technological knowledge to a population that is not competent in the languages while at the same time expecting the same population to use these languages in creative and innovative ways for Africa's development is indeed a daunting task.

The Function and Status of Languages in Kenya

Kiswahili is Kenya's language of pride and identification. Alongside English, it is used in parliament and in the publication of official government documents such as passports and birth and death certificates. Kiswahili is the language used for cross ethnic and cross border communication in Kenya and generally in East Africa. It is also the language that politicians use for interaction with the public (Musau 157). Being a national language Kiswahili gives the majority of Kenyans a sense of belonging, a national loyalty and a common identity. It serves as the language of solidarity because it functions to establish among speakers a "common ground, a sense of unity, a degree of intimacy and closeness or shared fate" (Githiora 236). In the East

and Central African region Kiswahili is a tool that facilitates unity and motivates integration among the different language communities.

Despite the fact that only 9% of Kenya's 33 million people speak English, it is the official language and the language in which judicial and government business is conducted (Crystal, 109). It is the medium of international communication and the language of higher education and science (Mutahi ix), functioning as the medium of instruction from grade four and beyond. It is taught as a subject in schools from the elementary level onwards. English provides Kenya's access to the world's technical and scientific knowledge that is necessary for modernization and economic development. It is the language most used in everyday communication among educated and professional Kenyans and for interpersonal relationships among families in the higher socio-economic bracket. The economically and politically powerful also use English in their everyday transactions (Githiora 242).

English indeed enjoys more functional privileges than Kiswahili in most public domains in Kenya. English is thus seen as the key to economic and educational advancement. The language is accorded very high status and has overall dominance in many spheres that are associated with modernization. The language is associated with power and elitism and is a major asset in social mobility. Its deployment often serves to establish formality and social distance between interlocutors (Githiora 240). This can be explained from the events of Kenya's colonial past. After the declaration of a state of emergency, English became more than just the official language and all the others had to bow before it (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 11). English, the language of the master, stood as a symbol of power and progress. Achievement in English was rewarded with prestige and was the ticket to higher realms. The African elite, which has now embraced this ex-colonial language, still exudes this power, and the common man, unable to use this prestigious tongue, feels alienated from this powerful "black man with a white mask" (Caute 5).

Except for Kiswahili, the other indigenous Kenyan languages are mostly confined to domestic, local and traditional non-literate domains. For example, they are used for intra-ethnic communication and for expression of ethnic identity and solidarity. These languages are used as media for the promotion of diverse cultures, and through them Kenyans continue to preserve and transmit the cultural values of their linguistic groups. Over 90% of Kenyans use indigenous languages in their day-to-day transactions. Indigenous languages are normally used for communication with family and friends. Some Kenyans, however, believe that the languages cannot be used for the conduct of global scientific and technological affairs (Okombo 13). In the school system, they are used as media of instruction during the child's first three years of primary education. Still at this level, reports of unavailability of instructional materials in indigenous languages are common (Muthwii 21).

In the media, English and Kiswahili dominate, but with a bias in favor of English. But the trend is changing as more privately owned FM radio stations that broadcast in major mother tongues are established in Kenya. For example, there are Ramogi Radio, Kass and Mrembe FM that broadcast in Dholuo, Kalenjin and Luhya respectively. One can argue that soon they may take away broadcasting space from English and Kiswahili in Kenya. The state owned radio, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, however, has more stations dedicated to English audiences than the rest of the languages spoken in Kenya.

In the publishing industry, most of the titles that are released every year are in English (Kembo-Sure, Mwangi and Ogechi 49). Very few materials are published in Kenyan indigenous languages, perhaps because of the myth that if books are published in these indigenous languages, there will be limited readership and the publishers will not make a profit. Perhaps

poverty explains this attitude towards literary reading. In a country where the majority of the population lives below the poverty level, the masses are more concerned about meeting their basic needs than buying a book, which to them is a luxury that they can hardly afford. As the preceding arguments demonstrate, English wholly dominates all the other languages in Kenya and a lot of importance is attached to the language.

A few scholars have successfully published in indigenous African languages and their books have been very popular among the target audience. Egara Kabaji, a Kenyan scholar, for example, published over 1,000 copies of a book, *Akanyonyi Kokogenyia*, in his mother tongue (Luhya) and all the copies sold out within a month (Kembo-Sure et al. 49). Additionally, a number of Kenyan writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Gakaara wa Wanjau published a number of books in Kikuyu. I concur with Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (3) view that Africans must be prepared not to distance themselves from their own languages.

Parents do all they can to have their children enrolled in elite schools where they can acquire "the Queen's English." This is solely because of the advantages that they think English will offer their children in the long run due to the prestige associated with the language (Muthwii 22). Some of these advantages include securing employment nationally and internationally, avenues for access to further education abroad, and to the large body of knowledge in English. Indigenous languages are treated as if educationally and economically they are not important and they seem to be left to wither and die off naturally despite the need for preservation of the linguistic heritage that they offer.

Why Have Indigenous Languages Been Marginalized?

The prevailing attitude that indigenous languages are inferior to ex-colonial languages and that they are inadequate for academic purposes have contributed in their marginalization (Bamgbose 14). Basing his argumentation on Fanon's thinking, Cauter (1) observes that as a result of colonialism, many Africans were injected with inferiority complexes, thus developing a negative attitude towards their culture, themselves, and their language. He further argues that the black man feels and lives his inbred racial guilt, throughout his life, aspiring to be white. Some elite blacks want to be seen as assimilated Europeans. Thus the African's craving for elitism has been cited as the major obstacle in the quest for recognition and development of indigenous languages so that they can be used in modern discourse (Musau 162). Commenting on the role of indigenous languages in global transactions, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (16) notes that the wealth of experience, knowledge and values embodied by these languages can be written and then translated into other global languages because then the world can borrow much from African cultures. But for a long time there has been conscious elevation of ex-colonial languages and an acceleration of negative feelings towards indigenous languages. Wolff (2) argues that unenthusiastic attitudes towards indigenous languages are usually based on obvious superficial rationalizations in an attempt to justify imbalances born of injustices of history and circumstances.

The establishment of Kamuzu Academy in Malawi illustrates the undervaluing of African cultures and its people by African leaders, to the extent that African teachers are regarded as inferior to European teachers solely because of the language issue. For example, no Malawian is allowed to teach in the Academy and the teachers are recruited directly from Britain, for there is fear that a Malawian might lower the standards or rather the purity of the English language (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 19). BBC television has already produced a documentary about the Academy making a comparison with the English public school tradition. The focus was upon the day-to-day experiences of students and expatriate staff at the academy (www.kamuzuacademy.com/history.htm).

Such negative attitudes are often rationalized in terms of lack of scientific terminologies in the indigenous languages, expenses and lack of neutrality, among others. The 1964 Ominde Education Commission in Kenya, for example, claimed that it was not necessary to use Kiswahili as the medium of instruction because it would require "adaptation to unaccustomed scientific uses." As a consequence, the ex-colonial languages are favored while indigenous languages continue diminishing into some low status. As Obanya (484) states, a language grows by being used. Like human beings, languages also adapt, invent and innovate to meet the new challenges. This is something indigenous languages will be able to do, once they are empowered to do so because as a culture grows, it places new communicative demands on its language, and the language expands to respond to the new challenges. In fact there are new words that are being invented in local languages to address modern technology such as "*kamunguriu*" for a cell phone and "*mukingo*" in Kikuyu language for HIV and AIDS. As it is, HIV/AIDS manuals in Kenya are found in most indigenous African languages.

Indigenous African languages continue to have low status in education, administration and in all official business dealings. This can be associated with what Bamgbose (43) notes as alienation resulting in unfavorable attitudes towards African languages. For example, teachers in Nigeria said they did not prefer the use of mother tongue as the medium of instruction because that would be denying learners' access to English, the language of power and prestige (Adegbite 188). In addition, there is clear preference among the African elite for early acquisition of ex-colonial languages, taking pride in proficiency in the imported languages at the expense of a sound knowledge of one's own mother tongue. There is also preference by the elite for written communication in ex-colonial languages, addiction to information disseminated in these ex-colonial languages by electronic and print media, and lack of interest in, and concern for, the development of indigenous languages. Nevertheless, only a minority controls these ex-colonial languages.

Why Revitalize Indigenous Languages?

There is need to develop all the languages of the world without discrimination and to start including them in the transactions of global discourse, much as what Microsoft is doing in several languages, including Swahili. The situation in Kenya right now is that English is the most developed and prestigious language, followed by Kiswahili, while indigenous languages are placed a distant third, and their presence is hardly felt in formal contexts in Kenya.

As Okombo (43) notes, modern development relies heavily on knowledge and information. Indeed Kenya and other African countries rely significantly on foreign sources of knowledge and information, especially in the areas of science and technology. This knowledge and information comes to Africa through international languages, which are not indigenous to the African continent. For the development of ideas to take root in Africa and benefit from African creativity, Okombo observes that development activities must involve African masses, not only the elite. He further argues that the goal of involving the African masses in development activities cannot be achieved through a national communication network based exclusively on non-indigenous languages. I concur with Okombo's view that for Kenya to achieve its developmental vision and thereby place the country in the world developmental map then the issue of involving and integrating all the citizens in nation building and development, using codes that the masses will understand, needs to be addressed and dealt with urgently.

Further, the available literature on learning stresses the advantages of using indigenous languages in education. The use of mother tongue in education has been noted to result in cognitive advantages for school learners. Ejieh (74) notes that children who are obliged to learn

in a language that they are not fully competent in are extremely disadvantaged and are unable to catch up in their learning. If this is the case, then through the use of indigenous languages in education children will benefit culturally, socially, linguistically and cognitively.

Indigenous languages should be used in schools. At times students may find it hard to understand and comprehend the advice being given to them during counseling services. Students in a study done by Muthwii (27) preferred the use of indigenous languages, rather than English, as they did not understand at all the messages that were communicated in English. While making a contribution, they felt frustrated and were unable to get their message across. Teachers too, end up translating the content of their lessons. Furthermore, the use of a language that learners know from infancy could make the lessons interesting and will facilitate better comprehension of material. The children also have their self-worth and identity affirmed through the use of their mother tongues in school.

Further, the language issue seems to be contributing to the poor performance of students in examinations in Kenya. The examination questions are framed in English and most of the students have not mastered the basics of the language. The candidates therefore do not seem to understand what the questions ask of them and when they do, they lack the proper linguistic facility to express themselves (Njoroge and Nyamasyo 64). Perhaps if learners were examined in their own indigenous tongues, the story would be different.

Nationally, the use of indigenous languages enhances ethnic solidarity, social integration, linguistic and cultural pride and efficiency in communication. Adegbite (190) notes that English does not effectively convey all the nuances, cultural loading, feelings and emotions required by the particular messages people want to communicate. As a second language English ought to complement the indigenous African languages that serve as mother tongues for Africans. Rather than dominating, it should occupy a secondary position to them.

The Way Forward

Revitalizing indigenous languages will not be easy but it is a possible venture worth the energy and attention. Africans themselves must be the ones to take the initiative to determine their own direction as far as language questions in this modern age are concerned. As Bamgbose (14) argues, the challenges in development and promotion of these languages are "formidable but despair should not be allowed to set in." Most post independent African governments have failed indigenous people, closing them out and leaving them illiterate and oppressed in their own land (Kamwangamalu 147). This should be turned around so that the indigenous languages can assert themselves in the global village and enjoy the gifts of modern science and technology, arts and education, which for now are exclusively packaged in a select few of the world's languages. As African scholars, we should campaign for inclusion of indigenous languages in the global outfit to start a new course for these languages in the global arena.

Re-assessment of the functions accorded indigenous languages is paramount if they are to acquire a higher status than is the case now. If the value of indigenous languages is increased and the functions to which they are put are increased, the population's attitude towards them will ultimately change. At the moment, there are negative attitudes towards the use, promotion and development of African languages, which ought to be changed by enlightening the populace.

A good starting point would be to have the study of indigenous languages entrenched in the Kenyan curriculum if the languages are to develop to the extent of being able to handle technological and scientific communicative needs. Thus effort should be made to teach all the

indigenous languages in Kenya. Such efforts should be followed by the production of textbooks and other resources in these languages to provide readers with enough literature on the languages. This will help to produce speakers who can be trained in indigenous languages so that they can advance them for purposes of attaining a level of maturity expected in modern scientific and technological discourse (Muranga 130).

There ought to be a clear policy that would recognize and promote all the languages used in the country. Indigenous African languages ought to play greater public roles in more public domains in Kenya than is the case now if their status among the citizens is to change. For example, indigenous languages can play a more pivotal role in education as medium of instruction, in the mass media (both electronic and print) and also in conducting government business, where possible. This will go a long way to help in changing the attitudes of most Kenyans towards their mother tongues. Ultimately, more Kenyans would be able to write, read and access information and knowledge in their language, thus participating in the political, economic and judicial systems of Kenya in their own tongues.

There should be a policy to make indigenous Kenyan languages examinable throughout the different educational tiers. This is happening in South Africa and in a small way in Uganda where Luganda is taught up to university level. For example, when Kiswahili was made a compulsory subject in Kenya in 1985, its status got boosted and many publications in the language were produced. Further afield in Tanzania, the status of Kiswahili has risen steadily since independence and attitudes towards the language have changed because the government allocated more functions to it. As Oduori (107) enthuses, if education is to impact positively on development, it is important that it socializes the target community. I concur with him that one way of achieving this socialization element is through the language medium, which the local community can easily identify with, and can easily access. Any other language will only help to alienate and marginalize the people, pushing them to the periphery.

Kenya should aspire to preserve and develop her indigenous languages. As Simire (240) argues, in order to develop, African countries should strive to reach all individuals across diverse ethno-linguistic groups in their own languages. For Kenya to achieve this language policy in education will have to be changed so that more recognition and application of indigenous languages in the system will be ensured. I concur with Muranga (131) that politically, culturally and economically the best language policy framework within which to embrace and propagate indigenous languages in Kenya (and perhaps in most other African countries) is, at a minimum tri-lingual, comprising African indigenous languages (mother tongues), the language of regional communication (Kiswahili) and the language of international communication (English). Provision for indigenous languages in the curriculum should be put in place so that one can study these languages from elementary up to tertiary levels.

After Kenyans will have been exposed to their own indigenous languages, the national leadership ought to spearhead a massive translation of government documents such as the constitution, so that all Kenyans can understand and follow such documents in their mother tongues or those of the immediate linguistic environment. Through training in their own mother tongues, Kenyans will then be encouraged to write in those languages because they will be assured of readership. Further, more translation of specialized works should follow to cover a variety of fields such as politics, science, culture, and philosophy.

Kenya's constitution should recognize and spell out the language rights of its citizens. Kenya can borrow a leaf from South Africa where eleven languages are official, including nine indigenous ones (Okombo 18). The country is taking positive and practical measures to elevate the status and advance the use of indigenous languages. The South African constitution notes

that all languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably. With the support of the government, it will be possible to combat the population's negative attitudes towards indigenous languages.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for the need to revitalize indigenous African languages so that they can have a place in the global arena. This will be possible when Kenya and other African countries embrace multilingualism and see it as the asset that it is, and take care of this unique characteristic by means of language planning and policy. Diversity in multilingualism can be positively harnessed to engender unity and progress in a nation (Adegbite 192). Indeed if managed well, this diversity will ensure that we have modern, economically viable and technologically developed societies. Perhaps there is need to re-allocate communicative functions to Kenya's languages. For example, specialized information ought to be passed and received in indigenous languages, the national language and the official language so that no citizen is disadvantaged and ultimately national development will result.

The paper has also pointed out the need to deal with the attitude of the Kenyan populations towards their own indigenous languages. One's own mother tongue is one's identity and it should not be denigrated in any way. In fact there are benefits when one starts looking at the world from one's own perspective instead of looking at it from the colonial perspective. The country should look at the languages spoken by the citizens in terms of how they can be utilized to contribute to the welfare of all its citizens.

All languages in Kenya should be treated equally. The indigenous languages need to be revitalized and used in all spheres of life because they are "our languages, our culture, our gift and pillar for Africa's development" (Zombe 1). Exposing these languages to the citizenry will help bring up a people who are skilled, creative, and great problem solvers, consequently, bringing up development in Africa. Indeed Africa must be ready to use her diverse tongues to tell her story and explain herself to the world. As Fanon, cited in Cauté (16) concludes, for the African masses to participate in national development, they must first of all be able to tell their story in their own tongues. But this calls for the political commitment of the national leaders in Africa if meaningful strides are to be made for the recognition of indigenous languages, first in Africa and then globally.

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