THE ROLE OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES IN DEVELOPMENT IN THE 21st CENTURY: REFLECTIONS ON POLICIES ON AFRICAN LANGUAGES IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

Education remains the most crucial force for development in the 21st century. In the African context, major issues that will continue to shape educational policy in the new century will revolve around fundamental problems such as mass poverty, illiteracy, technological backwardness, disease and undeveloped infrastructure, among others.

This brief paper argues that one of the obstacles of educational advancement in Africa has been the lack of vision and clear sense of purpose in determining the language of instruction. This problem has largely been brought about by many unperceived or ignored fallacies ingrained in the philosophy governing language policies in most confines on the continent.

It calls for the recognition of multilingualism and multiculturalism as assets and not liabilities in development. By so doing, policy makers and implementers will see the urgent need to assign a bigger role for the African languages in education and other facets of development.

Introduction

The 21st century will be characterised by issues in education. In its widest sense, education will remain the most important tool for technological transfer, liberalization and globalization of economies and trade. In the African context, however, these issues will be discussed and executed against a background of the typical challenges that have marked life on this continent for the better part of the 20th century. These include mass poverty, illiteracy, technological backwardness, disease and poor physical and information infrastructure, to mention but a few examples.

This paper argues that the problem of the choice of the language of instruction in Africa has remained largely unresolved mainly because of certain fallacies ingrained in the debate on language policy. It will demonstrate that these fallacies have been consolidated by the ruling power elite and other interested stake holders both within and without who have recently seized upon the philosophy of globalization and used it to deny indigenous languages such as Kiswahili any meaningful role in the educational sector. In addition, the paper will advance the argument that so long as the status quo remains, illiteracy and other forms of socio-economic underdevelopment that have been part and parcel of life on the African continent in the post-colonial era, will persist far into the 21st century.

Language is an integral part of the human society and thought system. Therefore, to the extent that development entails socio-economic, cultural or political change, language is to be seen not just as a vehicle for that change but part of it. In some sense, it could also be a cause of it (Goody. 1987: 311). Historically, mastery of language in both its spoken and written forms marked the watershed in passage from traditional to modern intermediary social order (Persons 1966) What this observation means is that eradication of illiteracy is regarded as a basic step toward technological and scientific advancement with its attendant challenges and opportunities.

The stagnating and disenabling effects of illiteracy in Africa are well-known and need not detain us here. For instance, this social obstacle locks out the majority of the population from active,
direct, productive or meaningful participation in most aspects of socio-economic, political and cultural development. Such a community can neither access useful and often crucial information that affects its living conditions such as health, education, polling, environment, food production, commerce, security and other areas of well-being.

The Problem Defined

Ethnic rivalry and animosity is not uncommon in post-colonial Africa. Whether one is talking of the large and densely multilingual and multicultural Nigeria (Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa and others) or the fundamentally unilingual states such as Somalia, Rwanda and Burundi (the former is populated only by the Somali while the latter two countries are populated basically by the Tutsi and the Hutu who are linguistically regarded as belonging to the same group), the story is the same. Such enmity has been witnessed in Uganda, Zimbabwe, South Africa and even here in Kenya.

What is not so clear is the fact that although the popular view is that such hatred and competition is linguistically portrayed and exploited, the fact of the matter is that language is not always at the root of the problem. Otherwise, the Somali who share the same language, religion and culture would not be fighting along clan lines even to this day. This means that such socio-political conflicts which keep dogging this continent and smack of narrow linguistic ethnicism, are not simply fuelled by membership to a given language community but rather by scramble for opportunity for upward mobility, which is, in many cases, determined by the level of literacy. This socio-economic and political mobility is the main expectation of all African communities, especially as characterised by the massive rural-urban migration phenomenon observed in the post-independence period in all African countries.

However, there is a school of thought that tends to blame the penetration of European languages in Africa and the relegation of the indigenous languages on the continent’s lack of linguistic nationalism such as has been experienced in India, France and the Middle East (Mazrui and Mazrui. 1998: 102). But, as observed above, Africa does not seem to have had an abundance of cases of linguistic rivalry even in countries like Ethiopia which did not experience direct colonial occupation. Since these struggles between language groups did not commonly exist in Africa, one can only conclude that the problem on down-grading African languages by promoting foreign ones is not necessarily as a result of multilingualism but rather the embracing of the foreign languages and cultures by Africans in the mistaken belief that such languages ensure the highest degree of political neutrality and symbolise the detribalised social order, which is an essential prerequisite for modernisation.

Fallacies on African Languages Policies Deciphered

There are a number of views that have been invented, propagated and disseminated on African languages for a long time by both foreign and African scholars, thinkers and leaders but which can no longer stand the test of time or logic. Such views have over time been found to be pure falsehoods or at best unsupported presuppositions calling for dismissal or exposure. Examples of some of these views are given below:

a) African languages are mainly oral and belong to the pre-literate historical times. This view is normally held by those opposed to the adoption of these languages in modern African states preferring, instead, foreign languages. However, this view is oblivious of the fact that such languages as Ethiopia’s Amharic, Nigeria’s Hausa and East Africa’s Kiswahili have a long written tradition which is quite comparable with that of classical English and French (Ibid. 5) As Mazrui and Mazrui (1998:6) point
out, “Some Ethiopians were literate and sophisticated long before the written word was common currency among the Anglo-Saxons in the British Isles” (Bender, 1976).

b) **Modern scientific and technological knowledge cannot be accessed through African languages because they are semantically and intellectually insufficient and are therefore, incapable of conveying abstract ideas. This function, is therefore only suitable for Western languages.** However, as Prah (1998:7-8), argues, “This is an ideology borne out of the mentality of dependency on the West. It is an attempt to appendix African languages and culture in general, on the foundation laid down by the former colonial world”. In order to make a serious contribution to human condition, the African discourse and intellectual enterprise should deal with and be informed by African realities, history, language and culture. Africa’s development must be based on the indigenous culture and where necessary, selected inputs and adaptations from outside. No example exists today even in the so-called industrialised countries, of a single nation that has developed using a borrowed or foreign language.

c) **Only languages of Europe should serve and be accepted as “world” languages while African languages should remain “home” languages as these are not even fit to serve as official or national languages in their countries of origin.** This view goes on to claim that European languages are more suitable for official or national communication because African nations being multilingual need a politically neutral language to avoid arousing tribal sentiments if a local African language were to be chosen. This claim is baseless, since, in the first place, the use of the label, “world” language is misleading since it only refers to languages of former colonial powers of Britain, France, Spain and Portugal. This label reflects a situation of the economic and technological dominance of these powers in the modern world. The infusion of these languages symbolises a process that is asymmetrical and which is more of incorporation rather than co-operation; it is a euphemism for co-option rather than mutual adaptation (Ibid: 3). As for the choice of an indigenous African language for official and national use in Africa, the success story of Kiswahili in Tanzania in such sectors as adult education, cultural development and basic education between 1973 and 1986, should be an adequate inspiration to the rest of the continent (Temu, 1998: 152). Of course, multilingualism is a reality in Africa as it is in most other continents. It need not be seen as an obstacle to nationalism or nation-building. The choice of the official or national language is a matter of a national debate and consensus. Some nations such as South Africa have resolved to develop 11 indigenous languages plus English and Afrikaans for this purpose.

d) **National unity can only be secured by using a European language such as English or French as the official language and an indigenous language such as Kiswahili as a “national” language.** This is a common belief among many African leaders who have since independence resisted choosing an indigenous language for official or national use in their countries arguing that to do so would only promote linguistic sectionalism and discrimination in their multilingual situations. This view is only largely limited to the African post-colonial nation-states since the reality of language choice in the rest of the world including Europe, Middle East, Asia and Far East indicate that the opposite is the practice. Most former colonised nations outside the African continent have long resolved to use their own indigenous languages for education and made a clear but rationalised break with the languages of their ex-colonisers. Therefore, the continued dependence of Sub-Saharan Africa on English, French, Spanish and Portuguese as official and, hence, educational medium, is not only indefensible but also detrimental to the socio-cultural development of the continent (Prah, 1999 and Limage, 1999: 1).

e) **In a further attempt to scuttle the need to embrace Africa’s multiculturalism and multilingualism, the contemporary language policies on the continent are premised on the mistaken belief that only the adaptation of one national language can ensure “national unity”** (Fishman, 1972). This view runs counter to the realities of the proven benefits of socio-cultural pluralism and divergence which is a
basic feature of the African world. If the more fundamental national democratic institutions are in place, linguistic pluralism cannot be a threat to national unity but, on the contrary, it would serve to cement it. Such institutions include a system of governance that has mechanisms to guarantee openness, accountability in all public affairs, periodic free and fair elections, equitable distribution of the national resources, security for the group or individual life and property.

Linguistic Globalisation and the Case for Kiswahili in the 21st Century

The third millennium will definitely be marked by increased demand for constant structural and philosophical change in cultural perspectives and practice, among other reforms. In Africa, this campaign will demand the strengthening of a culture of constitutionalism that ensures mass political participation. In the 20th century, this participation has remained largely inaccessible to the majority of Africans because the political establishments on the continent have continued to treat African languages as if they were all still oral and unworthy of serious consideration for learned debates and official communication (Mazrui and Mazrui. Ibid: 6).

Africa will have to launch an aggressive, well-co-ordinated, integrated and sustained campaign to project and promote teaching, use and research in her major languages for use nationally, regionally and globally in order to claim not just her lost cultural glory but especially to cut a niche for herself in the emerging world socio-cultural and technological order. This mission will not and cannot be carried out successfully by using the linguistic tools and resources of the former colonial world.

It is a fact that although modern (read Western) scientific and technological culture came to Africa through the medium of foreign languages, Kiswahili was an important tool of public administration and education in the colonial era and far into the post-independence period. However, the second half of this century has witnessed Kiswahili assuming a greater role in the scientific and technological development in East Africa. Right from independence, leading African scholars have asserted the need to use African languages such as Kiswahili and others to develop their capacity to handle modern science and technology (Hyder. 1966: 6; Alexandre. 1963: 21).

Over the centuries, Kiswahili has demonstrated a high capacity for adopting loan words from many foreign languages whose culture and social environment are quite different from her own. Such languages include, English, German, Arabic, Hindi, Persian and Portuguese. This is sufficient proof of the linguistic flexibility of the language as well as the creativity and imagination of its speakers in response to the challenge of the emerging technological and scientific environment. It is therefore a crying shame that, unlike their English, German, Russian, Chinese, French, Italian, Spanish, Korean or Japanese counterparts, African scientists and researchers cannot discourse in an African language. A situation whereby local scientists are trained in a foreign language to serve fellow Africans in Africa using a foreign language that only a tiny clique can speak or write, is indeed, a sorry state that calls for a revolutionary solution.

In addition to its historical role as a medium of administration, religion and education, Kiswahili has also distinguished itself in military science in East Africa and beyond in the 20th century. Today, Kiswahili has the best developed scientific and technological vocabulary of all African indigenous languages and it boasts the largest body of written literature covering many aspects of African life (Mdee. 1997; Masabo and Mwansoko. 1992, 1997). As such, Kiswahili is the foremost candidate for regional and eventually, continental lingua franca in the 21st century, alongside Africa’s other major languages (Kihore and Chuwa. 1997).
Conclusion

Given the insignificant role that African languages have been assigned in education in particular and development in general by the ruling élite, it is our view that the first step in enhancing this role is a shift in policy to promote these languages and de-emphasize foreign ones, especially at the local community level as well as in the intra-national communication.

Post-colonial African language policies have been based on and informed by the rulers' interest to inter-twine the political, economic and cultural destinies of their countries and peoples with that of their former colonisers. This is evidenced by the continued clinging to the languages of the West by these states in all aspects of their social life. At the regional and continental levels, no effort has been made to adopt, develop and use widely the spoken African languages with a view to enabling the people to integrate economically and socially.

The language dilemma for independent Africa outlined above has undermined her development in all aspects. For example, literacy has remained low or stagnant due to the continued dependence on foreign languages as media for instruction at all levels of formal education (Mbaabu. 1966; Ramahobo in Limage. Ibid: 623). Of course, failure to eradicate illiteracy remains one of the major obstacles to Africa's development—technologically, economically, socially and democratically.

In the 21st century, Africa will be drawn into the bandwagon of globalization and liberalization of the economies of the world. The philosophy and rationale behind globalisation is, in many instances, contradictory to the need for Africa to realise the goal for self-actualisation. As pointed out in the introduction, Africa has been more of a recipient rather than a contributor to the process of global integration. One only needs to look at the devastating effects of the World Bank and IMF engineered reforms on the quality of life of the African masses since the 1960's to date.

In a nutshell, these reforms have resulted in the total marginalisation of the continent and the deepening of her underdevelopment characterised today by mass poverty and dependence on the donor nations of the first World. Africa must therefore struggle to reclaim her rightful place in the World affairs by asserting herself culturally and socio-economically.

In addition to selling her economic and commercial packages on the world market, Africa must endeavour to forge a strong cultural image if her ideological and intellectual perspectives are to cut any ice at all at the globalised world arena of the 21st century. This cultural package will have to include the invigorated use of its viable languages in education, science and research.

The advocacy for the political leaders to change the language policy to favour a larger role for the African languages in Education and other aspects of communal and national life should also go hand in hand with campaigns by all stakeholders to disabuse these languages of the negative connotations and attitudes ingrained in the individual and collective mentality of all Africans (Okombo, Limage. Ibid: 596).

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