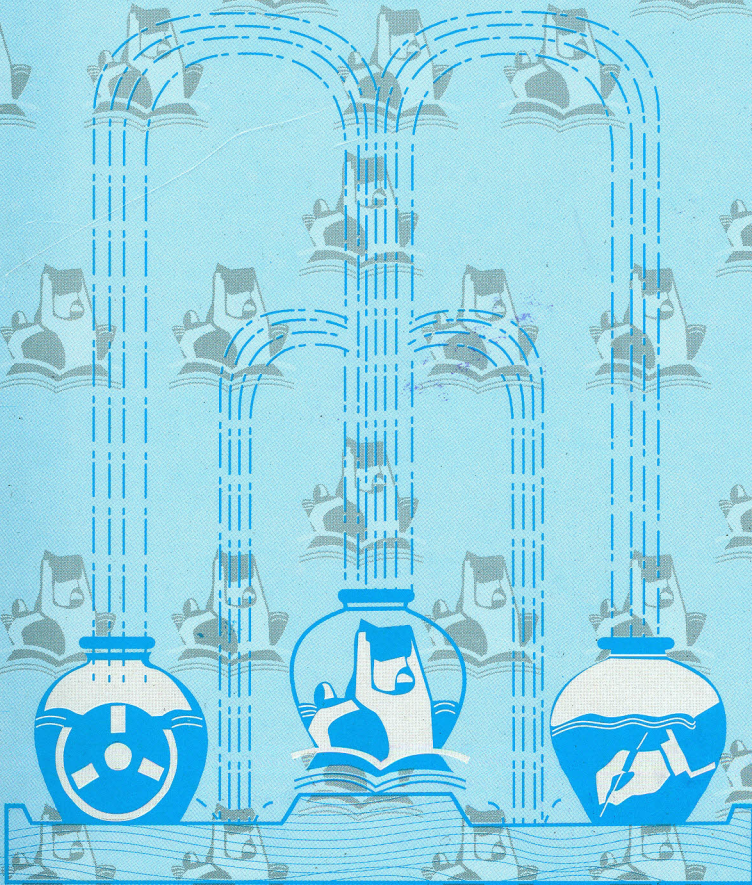


CHEMICHEMI

International Journal of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Volume 4 Number 2, 2007

ISBN 1563 - 1028



Kenyatta University

HARNESSING OUR LINGUISTIC HERITAGE FOR DEVELOPMENT

Clara Momanyi

Abstract

Culture can be defined as the total way of life of a given community. It encompasses the economic, political, historical, linguistic, and psychological dimensions of world communities. This being the case, development cannot be measured purely on economic terms. As a concept, development must reflect all areas of human activity (Prah 1993:18). Hence, it not only manifests itself in the economy of any given society but in all other aspects of human existence. Language being the key instrument of communication is the principal means of bringing about development. On the other hand, any exotic technology that has to be used in a given community will not be meaningful if it is couched in foreign languages. The initiators of such technology must take into consideration the indigenous knowledge structures for it to be readily accepted by the local people. This paper expounds the view that there is no country that can claim to develop by embracing foreign languages, ideologies, or culture. It elucidates the fact that national developments should not be restricted to economic and technological advancement, but that other parameters like language and culture have to be considered. The paper lucidly discusses Africa's linguistic heritage and the quest for development. It inextricably brings out the relationship between the linguistic and cultural base of communities, and the development of modern technology in Africa. Finally, the paper recommends steps that can be taken to incorporate African languages in the mainstream development of the continent, and avenues that can be used to preserve African linguistic heritage.

Usiache mbachao kwa msala upitao – A Kiswahili Proverb
“A bird in hand is worth two in the bush”

Introduction

Globalization is a term that has been interpreted differently by different nations and individuals. While it can mean rapid technological advances including Information Technology, trade liberalization, vibrant markets and the growth of enormous corporations, the term can also mean dividing the world into the rich and the poor nations. Third world countries are particularly concerned about the globalizing processes that affect their traditional ways of life, aggravating poverty and leading to linguistic enslavement.

This perception has made some third world countries and individuals to oppose international meetings like the World Trade Organization (WTO) whose main agenda is to launch a new global trade. Here, the rich nations are perceived to grow richer while the poor nations (most of them in the Third World) continue to grow poorer. The latter also include African countries, which are made to embrace free market economies too early and without safety nets for the majority poor. Globalization is being fronted under the guise of development of the world. Yet development is a wide concept that not only

involves nations but individuals in communities that make up the nation. Under the wave of globalization, national development is perceived and accentuated to mean socio-economic development. This is realized in terms of the increase in the Gross National Product (GNP) or the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The rise in per capita income is therefore the yardstick that is generally used to measure development. Other developments like the social, cultural or political are ignored because they simply cannot be measured easily. Economic development is therefore the axiom of the whole idea of globalization, yet people do not seem to acknowledge the role of language in achieving this development.

In this context, where do our languages feature? What role do our mother tongues play in contributing to our national developments? The linguist, the griot, the storyteller or even the literary writer is virtually excluded from this scenario of development. Globalization goes hand in hand with international languages where these play a major role at the expense of others, and have for decades demonstrated linguistic aggrandizement. Being the global languages, they are associated with technological advancements and world trade negotiations.

Most African countries are trying to grapple with the idea of globalization without realizing the serious cultural and linguistic effects this phenomenon is establishing. While development is a human oriented term, it should be associated with all progressive aspects of human life. This includes the right to exercise one's linguistic, cultural and political liberties. If globalization will come to mean linguistic enslavement and the eradication of some languages from the linguistic map of the world, then we need to find ways of sustaining those languages that are threatened by this global world trade wave of 'development'. In the academic circles, we keep quoting foreign idolized literary figures like William Shakespeare, Tolstoy or the Arab poet Abu Nuwas who lived from 756 to 810 A.D. We forget that these literary geniuses wrote their masterpieces in their own languages. Since literature can be used to develop languages, we need a change of attitude for purposes of embracing our indigenous languages as instruments of change and development.

On the other hand, national development should not be restricted only to economic and technological advancement but should also focus on cultural and linguistic advancements in order to realize total human development. This paper therefore examines the African linguistic heritage and how it can be harnessed to bring about total development of the individual and the nation at large.

African Languages and Development

The spread of western education during colonial times, and even in post-colonial times, has seen the emergence of myths and fallacies associated with Africa's cultures and languages. Some western scholars looked at Africa as a continent without history, civilization or even literature.

Perhaps the most astounding thoughts are myths related to African languages. Some

scholars claim that African languages are 'poor' in that their lexicon includes only a few hundreds or thousand words (Alexandre 1972). But this 'poverty' stems from lexicographers who are ignorant with the languages they studied or even their civilizations. Suffice it to say that there is no language spoken in the universe which does not cater adequately for the needs of its speakers. Besides, there is no language that is superior to the other. In the same vein, there is no language that can express more than the total context in which it is used. Hence, evidence of material context has to be there to bring about the need for a terminology or vocabulary.

Languages will expand and accommodate new concepts, new ideas or material things as their speakers interact with others or undergo social, economic, political or cultural developments. Languages as social institutions are a function of social reality situated within cultural and historical boundaries. In fact, they are specific cultural packages that represent a system of signs which significantly convey meaning between members of a speech-community (Prah 1993:17).

The idea that African languages are inferior was internalized by some of the Africans themselves, to the extent that they started disliking their own names, foods, dwellings and languages. This acquiescent nature among some of them led to the belief that European languages were more superior by all standards. With the coming of Pan-Africanism, some African scholars, historians, anthropologists and literary writers like Leopold Sedar Senghor started to revisit their own cultures and languages with the aim of advancing their well-being (Cartey 1971). A vivid example is the literary writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who writes his works in an African language (Gikuyu). The writer states that English language, for example, is used by other communities outside England for communication purposes. This language, however, can never be a tool for expressing the cultures of those communities (Ngugi 1986:13). A few proposals were even floated for the adoption of one or more African languages as the Pan-African Lingua franca. Kiswahili, for example, was proposed at the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists held in Rome in 1958. However, this proposal was never realized.

Recently, the decision by the African Union to pass a resolution making Kiswahili one of the organization's official language (July 2002) was a step in the right direction. The East African nations under the East African Community also recommended that Kiswahili become the region's lingua franca due to its role as the language of cross-border trade. These developments will put Kiswahili on the right pedestal as the most widely spoken language in Africa, and it will be in a better position to articulate issues affecting the continent to the masses.

It is also a fact that the spread of western education in Africa brought with it problems of language policy and planning in many countries. The problem was compounded by the enormous linguistic diversity in Africa. The continent is known to be the most linguistically diverse part of the world. The number of African languages is put at around 2000, (Grimes 2000). However, according to Grimes, this number is not static because some languages which for many years were not known are now being 'discovered' while at the same time those with few speakers are disappearing. Looking at Sub-Saharan Africa,

for example, every country in this region has from 12 to over 100 languages spoken within its boundaries. Kenya has slightly over 40 languages. Of these, 66% are Bantu languages of the Niger-Congo family (Mbaabu: 1987).

The languages of the colonial powers took advantage of this multilingualism and became the official languages, even after independence. Their expansion has, to some extent, undermined indigenous African languages which are being fossilized (Prah 1993:8). Our colonial heritage, to some extent, had thus adverse effects on the use of our African languages to realize developments right from the grassroots level. Some of these foreign languages, which were under the aegis of colonial rulers, became national languages and the result was the tendency to neglect indigenous African languages or play down their importance in national development. In countries like Botswana and Lesotho, colonial languages are used jointly with African languages as official languages. On the other hand, countries like Tanzania and Ethiopia have an active policy of utilizing their official African languages to serve in all spheres of national development.

The rationale of using African languages for national development is that in virtually all African countries, these are the languages that the majority of people invincibly use. Indigenous languages are the first languages that people learn after birth in most African countries. They are, therefore, the languages of acculturation and socialization in the intra-ethnic setting. It is through them that the majorities of citizens boost food production, operate machines and factories, conserve natural resources, transmit knowledge and information, and generally apply science for improvement of life. Indeed as Chesa (2001:80) points out, change agents and development strategists always wish to educate, mobilize and involve the ordinary citizens in participatory development. Therefore the communicative importance of a common indigenous language as a development tool needs to be emphasized. To this end, there is no country that can claim to have developed by embracing foreign languages and cultures. Sustained development right from the grassroots level can be achieved by using indigenous languages. This was realized in a workshop held in Addis Ababa (1990), under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and the German Foundation for International Development. The Harare Declaration of 1997 also acknowledged the fact that African languages can be used as instruments of preserving African peoples' creativity and boost development.

The importance of our indigenous languages for development was also echoed in January, 2000, in Africa where writers and scholars from different regions of Africa gathered in Asmara, Eritrea, for a conference. This was the first conference on African languages and literatures ever to be held in Africa. The participants noted that despite all the odds against them, African languages as vehicles of knowledge survive, and that they must take on the duty, responsibility and the challenge of speaking for the continent. As the President of Eritrea, Isaias Afwerki rightly put it, "We need to develop our languages in order to maintain our cultures". Tigrinya is the official African language used in Eritrea. For one to be integrated fully in the society, one must have education which can

be obtained formally or informally. In most African societies, early education is given informally through the use of our first languages. It is this first education that moulds the child and determines how he/she will live in future. African languages play a significant role in traditional social organizations, which are necessary for development.

It is sad that in most African countries, indigenous languages only feature in adult literacy or are restricted in the lower primary classes in formal education, where they are used as media of instruction. They are also used in the secondary school only as subjects in few countries. Here, the schools have to contend with lack of instructional materials in such languages. In most countries also, indigenous languages become important only in the political campaigns at the grassroots level due to the need to appeal to the majority of voters. This is because the majority of the people are not literate in the official language, which is usually foreign. In Kenya, for example, there has been the talk of Civic Education, HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns, Human Rights, Constitutional Review Process, and so on. All these need a language that people can understand in order to fully participate. Here, indigenous languages and/or Kiswahili play a vital role. The people in the rural areas may not comprehend well what all the above concepts mean. Given and perspicuously expressed in their own languages, will make them understand and participate fully in development.

In the same vein, when Parliamentary Bills are presented to the legislature in English, which is the official language of Kenya, it becomes difficult for the ordinary Kenyan to know what they entail. This is despite the Parliamentary languages being English and Kiswahili which the members of parliament do proficiency tests and are required to pass before they can be cleared to vie for parliamentary seats. Records are kept in English and there is no provision for translation and simultaneous interpretation. Woe to that lawmaker who does not comprehend fully the official language. He/she will just be an uncomprehending onlooker. If such important deliberations reach the masses in their own languages, they will not feel left out and not being incorporated in the mainstream of development.

If, on the other hand, the constitution is translated into the various African languages, most citizens would be conversant with the laws governing their land, and can also contribute positively on important national issues like the constitutional review process. While it is true that these languages are being used more in agricultural extension services, their use should also be extended in other sectors of the economy so as to realize total development. For example, they should be fully used in the administration of justice. In most of our courts today, the official language used is English. If a witness for example, is not conversant with this language, an interpreter is called upon to make it easier for the judge to listen to evidence being given. The competence of the witness or prosecutors is never tested. This definitely could lead to miscarriage of justice. Our languages are only important in the traditional village, the chief's courts or in customary courts where proceedings take place in local languages.

In this age of globalization, imported technologies continue to bombard most of African

countries. Industrial production, which involves imported technologies, is tied to foreign languages. This means that the latter dominates in industry and commerce. Yet at the grass roots where the peasant farmer, the house wife, the street vendor, the market woman or *Jua Kali* artisan operate, this official foreign language is not used. Instead, the indigenous language (mainly Kiswahili) is the medium through which this technology is interpreted and applied. Without the functional aspects of our languages, such technology would not be effective enough to bring about the country's technological advancement. This fact is emphasized by Prah (1993:46) who lucidly explains that development initiatives couched in European languages have little chance of being accepted for meaningful implementation. It is only when development is grounded on African cultures through the use of indigenous languages that technological advancement can be realized.

The presence of the digital computer means that our African languages have to keep pace with advancing new technologies. A lot of preparation has to be put in place, not forgetting the costs involved. Kiswahili language is presently making a giant technological step to have its lexicon computerized. It is only recently that two major software companies, Microsoft and Linux delved into the development of Kiswahili software computer programmes for purposes of opening up Information Technology opportunities to local and international Kiswahili users.

Rural mobilization and enhanced crop production owe their success mostly through the use of indigenous languages. This means that these languages can be developed to cope up with the high demands of modern living. A high percentage of the nation's per capita income is realized through the use of these languages by the masses in many sectors of our economies. We need, therefore, to develop and equip them in order to satisfactorily perform this important function.

Socio-culturally, the only sure way to develop our heritage is through the media of our own languages. Countries like Kenya recognizes the need to research, document and preserve indigenous cultures including orature to attain cultural pluralism. This is in line with UNESCO's recognition of the importance of promoting cultural identity, diversity and pluralism. Our cultural heritage can best be preserved through developing our indigenous languages since they are the means we use to express our cultures. Many African countries, including Kenya, have experienced Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPS), which were enforced by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Trade agreements advanced by the World Trade Organization (WTO), the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), including the General Agreements on Trade and Services (GATS), the Cotonou and Qatar Agreements or what is enshrined in such unions like the African Union or the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) should not just focus on the elite. The common citizens least know some of these international policies and declarations because the language of discourse is beyond their comprehension. It should also be realized that Africa has the highest population growth rate that grows at 3.2 percent annually. Approximately 600 million people living in Sub-Saharan Africa are poor (Aderinwale 1997:46). The problem is partly caused by

the high rates of illiteracy. This means that the majority of them cannot comprehend the concept of globalization, international trade discourses, or the underlying factors that contribute to their poverty. Any country that values the development of its citizens should strive to inform them through the use of a language the majority understands. Kenya is lucky to have Kiswahili which is widely used in the country.

Harnessing our linguistic heritage for spiritual development has been greatly realized through the translation of the Holy Scriptures into our languages. Translation is an important aspect in getting our people to acquire spiritual and secular knowledge. Translations carried out by the early missionaries in mid 19th century helped to preserve our linguistic heritage. Mugambi (1995:142) observes that the Bible is central to African Christianity, and is the most widely read book in tropical Africa. This is because it has been translated into many African languages. The Biblical message of incarnation can be discussed in our languages in terms of enculturation, conceptualization, indigenization and localization (Mugambi *ibid*). This becomes more appealing to the African Christian who also develops African Christian songs to fit in his culture through the indigenization of music. It is true that in many parts of the world, the early church experienced language problems in spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Not all societies understood Latin, for example, which was used to evangelize the masses. Hence, translation helped the message to sink in even better because it was conveyed in languages and dialects used by the recipients.

In East Africa, we give credit to Dr. Johann Ludwig Krapf, his wife Rosina Dietrich, together with a companion Johann Rebman, who were the first Bible translators. In 1844, Krapf understood the centrality of scripture translation into the vernacular languages, and set forth to translate the Genesis into Kimvita, a Kiswahili dialect spoken in the coast of Kenya. Further more in 1848, he translated the Gospel of St. Luke into Kiduruma language, which is one of the lower coastal languages of Kenya. (Mojola 1999:3) Dr. Krapf and others also helped to develop the orthography of Kiswahili language by writing a Kiswahili dictionary, besides providing a contribution to Kiswahili lexicography and linguistics.

It is inevitable that many languages in Africa today cry out for knowledge to be given in their own words and thought-forms expressed in their own native tongue. This is because language is a means of expressing peoples' perceptions, attitudes and fears. It is a way of expressing their world view and gives them a sense of being and belonging. Hence a lot of work and resources need to be committed to meet the challenge of developing indigenous languages. The introduction and enhancement of audio visual materials in our indigenous languages can not only help in passing knowledge but also enabling people to acquire skills that can benefit them. The production and use of film, television and the multi-media environment to pass on information in languages that can be understood by the large populations will mean that total development of individual and communities can be realized. In the recent past, Kenya has witnessed the establishment of several FM radio stations which broadcast in Kenyan indigenous languages. This is a step in the

realization of how important these languages are in the country.

Indeed, if African languages are to have any significant role in national development, they will have to be entrenched in education, and be officially encouraged in various other spheres in national activities. However, this can only be realized through a rigorous and sound language policy coupled with a massive investment in language development activities. While African universities grapple with the establishment of E-learning programmes, they should at the same time endeavour to initiate development of computer software programmes in some of our African languages that are widely used within and without the continent. It is noted here that in many African countries, less than 2% of the population is online. In East Africa, for example, for every 100 people, there is less than one computer available. In order to keep pace with the global processes in IT development, Africa needs to undergo a communication technology revolution where the majority of its people will be computer literate and even be able to navigate the web and access internet using African indigenous languages. This is a challenge to African governments as we turn the pages of the 21st century.

It is sad to note that many Kenyan universities are busy establishing structures to accommodate foreign language programmes at the expense of the indigenous languages. The developed countries are busy channeling funds to establish their own language centres where our students register to study them, being driven by job opportunities after completion of the studies. Africa has ignored her indigenous languages and knowledge systems that held societies together culturally and socially. African countries cannot fully achieve development without involving the people, especially at the grass roots level. This can easily be done through the use of a common indigenous language that cuts across all cultures and tribal boundaries. Yoruba, Hausa, Zulu Amharic and Kiswahili are some of Africa's indigenous languages that can be harnessed for the continent's development. In Kenya, it may be an uphill task to try and develop all the forty and above languages in order to use them in the education system. Finances may not allow this to happen. Yet we must devise ways of preserving and making use of our indigenous languages in information dissemination and the interpretation of new technologies.

The high incidences of illiteracy also make the use of African languages inevitable in the dissemination of information. People normally appreciate and put to practice knowledge that is conveyed in a language they can easily understand. It is in recognition of the importance of greater effectiveness of indigenous languages in national development that countries like Tanzania and Ethiopia have invested heavily in the use of these languages in all spheres of national development.

Recommendations

The popular belief that African languages cannot adequately take care of educational and technological developments is a fallacy aimed at discouraging these languages as vehicles of transmitting knowledge. There is no language that cannot adequately serve its speakers because it is the latter that gives it meaning and life. The problem here therefore is not the

capacity of languages, but the will to use them.

While it is true that creating an adequate scientific and technical vocabulary is a problem that can be experienced by some African languages, those that have ventured in this development (Kiswahili is a case in point) have managed to overcome the problem. This is by borrowing words from other African or even foreign languages and assimilating the borrowed items within the language's lexicon. It also involves digging deeper into the cultural treasures of the speech community to come up with appropriate or relevant vocabulary and technical terms to cater for this development. However, some African language experts have a tendency to adopt indiscriminate borrowing from European languages. This is not doing justice to our indigenous languages and soon we may end up with 'corrupted versions' of foreign languages in our own languages. As much as possible, vocabulary and some of the terminologies can be invented from native roots through using native methods of derivation.

African scholars and researchers have a duty to research, document and preserve local African languages. This noble duty should not be left to foreigners, some of who have interfered with the phonology while trying to represent some sounds orthographically. Perhaps we need to establish a Pan-African publishing or printing facility with an equipped phonetic keyboard that is capable of representing all the phonemes in the African languages.

Concerted efforts should also be put in place to resuscitate our dying languages and vanishing cultures. Due to lack of speakers or efforts to revive these languages, some of them are sadly disappearing from the linguistic map of Africa. For example, it is estimated that over 50% of the world's 6000 languages are endangered. 90% of the world languages are also not represented on the internet while 80% of the African languages have no orthography (<http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev>). Rapid urbanization, movement of people from the rural to urban centres, mixed marriages, and lack of commitment has contributed to some of the languages becoming near extinct. This sad state of affairs has also been realized by UNESCO, an international body with an agenda of protecting and revitalizing endangered languages. Languages of the marginalized groups and those that are dying through lack of speakers should be targeted and preserved. This will also be in line with the promotion of multilingualism and the observance of UNESCO's International Mother Language Day, which is celebrated annually on 21st of February.

Researches and linguistic studies for purposes of writing grammars and dictionaries of indigenous African languages need to be encouraged by all African governments. Research is also required to record the rich oral literature across the continent. Literary materials like proverbs, riddles, short stories, epic poems and idioms can be collected and preserved in the original indigenous languages. Recording of songs, dances and rituals into audio visual tapes and CDs would help to preserve not only their cultures but also their ways of expression. This will provide a rich source of our cultural heritage that can also be used in educational activities through generations. Through these efforts, one

can conceive a future time when some of these African languages may be used in inter-regional communication like in the case of Kiswahili language.

It is also a fact that works of translation are never complete because languages are dynamic. Translation, therefore, is a process that can go on ad infinitum. Languages change and adapt to the needs of time. Therefore older translations have to be revisited to meet these challenges. Translators and interpreters of African languages and literary materials have therefore to keep pace with the changing times by transmitting new knowledge and information to the indigenous communities.

However, African peoples should not limit themselves to the written word in order to achieve development in all spheres of life. We should not think (as Olabimtan (1982) puts it) of passing new knowledge through the book. New images and metaphors of conceptualizing knowledge are now emerging which can be shared for development. Besides, computer knowledge and new scientific audio visual equipment are some of the new technological advances that are posing new demands for creativity in how knowledge can be harnessed for overall development.

References

- Aderinwale, Ed. 1997. *Empowering Women for the 21 Century: The Challenges of Politics, Business, Development and Leadership*. Accra: A Report of the 9th Annual Conference of the African Leadership Forum.
- Alexandre, P. 1972. *An Introduction to Languages and Language in Africa*. London: Heinemann.
- Chesa, S. 2001. "Language as a Tool for Development: Reflections on Developmental Linguistics" Naomi Shitemi (et al). Eds. *Kiswahili As a Tool for Development: The Multidisciplinary Approach*. Eldoret: Moi University Press. Pp 80-82.
- Connell, D. 1997. *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution*. Asmara: The Red Sea Press.
- Gregersen, E. 1977. *Language In Africa: An Introductory Survey*. London: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers Inc.
- Grimes, B. 2000. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. Dallas/Texas: Summer Institute of Linguistics.
- Mbaabu, I. 1987. *Facilitating the Adoption of African Languages as Educational Instruments in the African Countries: The Case of Kenya*. Nairobi: UNESCO.
- Mojola, O. 1999. *God Speaks in Our Own Languages*. Nairobi: Bible Societies of Kenya.
- Mugambi, J. 1995. *From Liberation to Reconstruction. African Christian Theology after the Cold War*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o. 1986. *De-colonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Nairobi. EAEP.
- Ogot. B. 1990. "The struggle for the Third World-A Historical Perspective" Nairobi:

Public Lecture, Kenyatta University, September 1990.
Olabimtan, A. Ed. 1982. *African Universities and the Development of Wider Use of African Languages*. Lagos: UNESCO.
Prah, K. 1993. *Mother Tongue for Scientific and Technological Development in Africa*. Cape Town: ZED.

About the Author

Dr. Clara Momanyi is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Kiswahili and African Languages, Kenyatta University.