

EUROPEAN LANGUAGES AND THE MODERN AFRICAN STATE

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The politics of language in post-colonial Africa are both enormously complex and divisive. The colonial legacy left behind states with no grounding in ethnic and linguistic distribution, and as such many countries have continued with the use of the formerly colonial languages, particularly in administration and education. Since the end of the colonial era, a vibrant debate has arisen on the role of imperial languages in modern Africa. Many anti-imperialist critics argue that the continued reliance on European languages is an ongoing form of linguistic and cultural imperialism. Others maintain that European languages are not only a necessity, but can be legitimately appropriated to express the African experience. This paper will examine the theoretical debate regarding European languages and the African experience, and some of the obstacles to Africanizing national language policy. While European languages are undoubtedly on the continent to stay, there is potential and strong rationale for African languages to assume a greater role in national language policy

Between 2,000 and 2,500 languages are spoken on the African continent. This represents 30% of the world's languages, and thus, on average, every African country is home to between 35 and 40 indigenous languages.¹ Many scholars have argued that Africa is a linguistically unique continent due not only to the plurilingualism of African states, but also because of the high degree of multilingualism amongst the population. Linguistic divisions are generally but not exclusively along ethnic lines. Africa is also notable in the degree to which societies rely upon foreign languages. In demonstrating the linguistic dynamism of Africa Batibo uses a hypothetical example in which "a Tshivenda speaker in South Africa may speak Tshivenda to his parents but use IsiZulu to address his workmates, and then receive orders from his employer in Afrikaans. But he may use English in a bank or when talking to educated strangers, and finally use Fanagalo in a pub with colleagues."² The internal patterns of language use in African states are complex, and differing languages serve different needs and situations. Despite these difficulties, Batibo and others have

identified a recurring language hierarchy in African states.³ In this hierarchy, ex-colonial languages are considered the most prestigious, but are generally associated with the elite and have few native speakers. These ex-colonial languages continue to dominate government and education. Next in the hierarchy are dominant indigenous languages. These are African languages that have some regional importance, and often serve as *linguae francae* among different ethnic populations. Depending on government policy, dominant indigenous languages are used in some limited public capacities, such as local levels of government or in primary education. There is often some level of media, such as television and radio programming available in these languages, as is the case with Hausa in Western Africa. Dominant indigenous languages have some demographic weight and prestige either within a specific area, throughout an entire country, or across national borders. Generally they have some history as a trading language and are attractive to be learned as a second or third language. The third category, minority languages, are generally confined to a particular ethnic

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group with limited demographic potential and have only a marginal public role.⁴

As African countries gained their independence in the 1950s and 1960s, African administrations tended to marginalize indigenous languages and continue using colonial languages in government. (Important exceptions to note include Tanza-

nia, Somalia, Ethiopia, and the Arabic-speaking Northern African states.) There are several different explanations as to why the ex-colonial languages continue to enjoy such a privileged status in Africa. Most significantly, European languages are often referred to as "neutral" languages, because they are not associated with any particular ethnic group. In attempting to juggle ethnic and linguistic divisions and build coherent national identities, many governments opted for European languages to manage these differences. Chinua Achebe points out that even the vehemently anti-

¹ Batibo, Herman M. *Language Decline and Death in Africa*. (Cleveland: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2006.) 1.

² Batibo. 1.

³ Batibo. 18.

⁴ Batibo. 24.

imperial Marxist states maintained the use of European languages despite their colonial roots. He quotes a former minister from Burkina Faso who said “sixty different ethnic groups in the country could not mean sixty different nationalities.”⁵ Many attempts to render African languages the official language, such as Hausa in Nigeria, or Luganda in Uganda, have failed due to protests from other ethnic groups who feared domination by another cultural group.

However, language “neutrality” is not the only reason the colonial languages still enjoy such importance. Many relatively linguistically homogenous states, such as Rwanda and Burundi, and states with well-established and widely spoken African *linguae*

francae, such as Senegal and Namibia, still have European languages in “official” positions. After independence, rather than adapting their own *linguae francae*, it was much easier to continue using languages that were already widely used in the realms of technology, higher education, law and diplomacy. Within Africa,

and among many speakers of African languages, there remains a lasting association between European languages and modernity or prestige. For many Africans, ex-colonial languages are vehicles of social advancement, and in contrast African languages are often considered backwards and primitive. Western institutions such as the World Bank, who have strongly resisted attempts to provide education in national languages, frequently reinforce this perception.⁶ In Francophone Africa, France has been particularly assertive in ensuring linguistic allegiance to France through La Francophonie. Many African languages lack accepted orthographies and have not been adapted to academic or scientific literature. As such, they are perceived by many to be difficult to adapt into existing political and social institutions. In many cases, European languages are simply more convenient to maintain in official positions.

⁵ Achebe, Chinua. “Politics and Politicians of Language in African Literature.” *The Education of a British-Protected Child*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2009.) 106.

⁶ Alidou, Hassana. “Language policies in Francophone Africa.” *Black Linguistics*. (London: Routledge, 2003.) 106.

“to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.”

It would be grossly misleading to discuss language as simply a means of communication. Language also embodies a world-view and perspective unique to a particular culture and it is a means of preserving and communicating knowledge. As Frantz Fanon asserted in his seminal work, *Black Skins, White Masks*, “to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.”⁷ African languages are unique carriers of African knowledges, cultures and experiences. When considering language in the post-colonial context, it is imperative to examine the social and psychological effects of relegating native African languages to a position beneath the European tongues.

The prominent Kenyan novelist, playwright and intellectual, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, has been a vocal advocate for the use of African languages. After publishing several successful plays and novels in English, he dramatically rejected English for Swahili and his mother tongue, Gikukuyu. Over the years he has written extensively on the politics of language in Africa, and identifies the continued use of ex-colonial languages as a form of cultural imperialism.⁸ As opposed to simple political or practical convenience, wa Thiong’o relates the ongoing supremacy of European languages to the backgrounds of the African elites who took power at independence. He maintains they were and are products of their European educations and cultural experience. This is a fact that many analysts have seized upon, and many have noted the degree to which the school systems of many African countries, particularly in the Francophone world, mirror colonial practices.⁹ This is representative of an ongoing class struggle, in which elites are familiar with European languages, while the masses continue in the use of African languages.

Wa Thiong’o’s analysis details how language imperialism served to accomplish the economic aims of colonialism through controlling people’s means of self-definition in relation to others and systematically devaluing local cultures. He effectively demonstrates how “the domination of a people’s language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized.”¹⁰ For wa Thiong’o, the division

⁷ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. (New York: Grove Press, 1967.) 18.

⁸ Wa Thiong’o, Ngugi. *Decolonising the Mind*. (London: James Currey, 1986.) 16.

⁹ Alidou. 108.

¹⁰ Wa Thiong’o. 16.

of Africa into Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone countries is a dangerous absurdity, which has no grounding in the realities of African societies. Due to the continuing reliance on European tools of expression and self-definition, Africa remains trapped in a culturally subservient role that is incompatible with national development. Other analysts, such as Alamin Mazrui, have taken a less linguistically deterministic approach, and maintain that more harmful than speaking a European language are the negative stereotypes internalized from a Eurocentric worldview.¹¹ Nonetheless, Mazrui is a strong advocate for the scientification of African languages, and places great importance on shattering the paradigm that associates modernity and progress with European languages. To modernize African orthographies, adapt them to scientific and technological purposes, and increase their value in higher

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education could have profound effects for Africa. This would not only help affirm the equality and worth of African languages, but has great democratizing potential, as it would empower large segments of the population familiar with African languages yet unfamiliar with European ex-colonial languages.

The dependency on European languages is often seen as part of a broader “intellectual dependency” within Africa. It is this intellectual dependency that led Wa Thiong’o to denounce the African university as one of the greatest impediments to African self-identification and the development of the African novel.¹² As Mazrui points out, “a university-trained surgeon who does not speak a European language is a sociolinguistic impossibility.”¹³ This is particularly troubling when compared to other post-colonial states where physicists, economists and others are able to function in their own national languages. Another particularly interesting point Mazrui raises, is that few or no countries have succeeded in economic development in a foreign language. Despite the ideology of the World Bank and IMF, capitalism is most successful in countries where the language of the marketplace and the language of the classroom are the same.¹⁴

¹¹ Roy-Campbell, Zaline M. “Promoting African Languages in Educational Institutions.” *Black Linguistics*. London: Routledge, 2003. 86.

¹² Wa Thiong’o. 69.

¹³ Mazrui, Alamin. *English in Africa After the Cold War*. (Clevedon, Multilingual Matters, Ltd.) 58.

¹⁴ Mazrui. 122.

As the Asian countries have done, it is perhaps important for African countries to indigenize modernization as opposed to attempting imitations of Europe. Furthermore, how representative or accessible can a state be if only a minority of the population speaks the official language?

In opposition to the hardline wa Thiong’o takes with regard to linguistic imperialism, many other African revolutionaries and intellectuals have defended their use of European languages. Despite the censure wa Thiong’o reserves for African intellectuals and writers who work in European languages, Achebe distinguishes between wa Thiong’o’s perspective and his own by explaining that when it comes to indigenous and European languages in African literature “Ngugi *now* believes it is *either/or*, I have always thought it was *both*.”¹⁵ Achebe goes on to explain that he writes in English not because of its role as a global language, but because it is so central to Nigerian life. Nigeria, Africa’s most populous state, is also one of its most linguistically diverse and politically tense. Achebe points out that English is now a central feature of the Nigerian experience, and writing in the language enables him to bridge the linguistic gap among his fellow Nigerians. Ken Saro-Wiwa, a prominent Nigerian activist against the neo-colonial state, who was executed in 1995 said, “...I remain a convinced practitioner and consumer of African literature in English. I am content that this language has made me a better African in the sense that it enables me to know more about [fellow Africans from] Somalia, Kenya, Malawi and South Africa than I would have otherwise known.”¹⁶ These quotations illustrate the degree to which the English and other European languages have been appropriated to express the African experience.

English has a long history as a pan-African language. Not only did English serve as a means of communication amongst and within former European colonies, it also facilitated communication with the African diaspora. In particular, African-Americans assumed central places in the leadership of Pan-Africanist thought. Implicit in the words of Saro-Wiwa and others, is that the very idea of Pan-Africanism arises from a colonial, and particularly English, context. In Lusophone and Francophone Africa as well, many scholars have examined how Colonial languages were often adapted to express a more revolutionary vocabulary, taking the former Imperial language and using it as an ideological tool.¹⁷ As example of this

¹⁵ Achebe. 97.

¹⁶ Saro-Wiwa, 1992, from Mazrui, Alamin M. 69.

¹⁷ Mazrui. 73.

process, Frantz Fanon in particular wrote extensively on how the liberation of Algeria facilitated a taking back of the French language from its colonial past and appropriating it to the struggle for independence.¹⁸ While the appropriation of European languages may have been an important ideological tool during the independence era, the time has come to re-evaluate their official position. Assimilation and urbanization have already had huge transformative effects in African countries. Particularly in urban environments, it is simply impractical to deliver education in the native tongues of each child. Reversing assimilation and segregating pupils on the basis of mother tongue is also neither practical nor desirable. While it is of course important to protect endangered languages, some degree of language loss is inevitable. The question is then of course, which language is most appropriate for use in the educational context. Aside from the children of the elite, who largely attend inaccessible private schools, the masses of pupils and even many teachers have inadequate familiarity with European languages. Some studies have demonstrated that students are less likely to participate in class because they are unfamiliar with the language of instruction.¹⁹ Furthermore, due to standardized examinations, they are only tested in European languages, which Alidou and others have demonstrated are an inaccurate and unfair means of assessing pupil's ability in a variety of subjects.²⁰ Alongside the political issues at play, there are clearly some basic questions of educational quality. Promoting the that are already understood by both teacher and pupil makes sense as a means of ensuring educational equality. While it may be desirable to acquire a European language down the road, it should not be at the expense of literacy and grounding in a more familiar tongue.

The dialogue surrounding language in Africa can often be misleading. Particularly when discussing endangered languages, there is a tendency to talk about European languages as "killer" languages that are demographically wiping out African tongues. Interestingly, many scholars predict that endangered indigenous languages do not face the greatest threat from European languages, but from nationally and regionally dominant *linguae francae*.²¹ While recording and protecting these endangered languages is very important to their preservation, it is preferable to have them displaced by widely accepted African *linguae francae* as opposed to

ex-colonial European languages. One of the most dramatic examples of this trend is Senegal, where the official language, French, is only spoken by about 15 percent of the population, as opposed to Wolof, the lingua franca, which is spoken and understood by nearly 90 percent of the country.²² Several similar cases, such as Botswana, Madagascar and Zimbabwe can be found across the continent. Countries with well-established, dominant African languages often afford token respect to one or two languages as "national" as opposed to "official" languages.²³ For the sake of accessibility and self-determination, it is essential that higher education and administration take more important steps to recognize languages that already have much larger demographic bases than the local colonial language.

A paradigm shift is required in how African languages are valued, both on the continent and abroad. There remains a pervasive mentality that African languages are linguistically inferior to their European counterparts, and should be subordinate in the realm of public policy. While there have been significant structural causes for the underdevelopment of African languages, their development is not only possible but also valuable. They often remain in marginal roles because political decision-makers lack the necessary political will needed to enrich them, not because of any innate inferiority on the part of the languages or their speakers.²⁴ Tanzania and its institutionalization of Swahili in the post-colonial context has been a very important case in this discourse. The Tanzanian case has demonstrated the potential efficacy of adopting African lingua francae to fill national roles. The Tanzanian state has invested considerable resources in expanding the lexical base of the language, refuting the notion that African languages lack the necessary linguistic sophistication for application to higher education and government.²⁵

It is also of great importance to acknowledge Africa's linguistic diversity as a blessing, not a curse. The sheer diversity of African languages has immense value in the cultural and linguistic wealth they hold. As opposed to barriers to national development, they ought to be vehicles for such development, with great encouragement to invest time in translation and development of these diverse language groups. Some academics have even proposed grouping African languages with high levels of mutual intelligibility together, and creating languages with standardized

¹⁸ Mazrui. 74.

¹⁹ Alidou. 104.

²⁰ Alidou. 104.

²¹ McLaughlin, Fiona. "The Ascent of Wolof as an Urban Vernacular and National Lingua Franca in Senegal." *Globalization and Language Vitality*. (London: Continuum, 2008.) 142.

²² McLaughlin. 145.

²³ Batibo. 20.

²⁴ Roy-Campbell. 86.

²⁵ Roy-Campbell. 90.

orthographies out of their shared characteristics.²⁶ These proposals could add demographic weight to these already widely spoken languages, and facilitate their use in government and education. Not all indigenous languages need to be afforded equal public roles. In fact, such a scheme would be impossible, but it is imperative that countries continue to abandon unilingual official language policies, and afford greater public roles to African languages.

CHANGING TRADITIONS: REDUCING THE PREVALENCE OF FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION IN AFRICA

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Female genital mutilation (FGM), (also referred to as Female Circumcision or Female Genital Cutting) has become a major concern in Africa, and is starting to attract significant international attention. Unfortunately, until very recently, there has been a considerable lack of research and productive action against FGM, and because of this, there is little consensus on how the problem should be dealt with. I propose that local groups, particularly those led by women, are most effective in slowing the practice of FGM in Africa, and the best method by which they can do this is through education. For this argument, I will first provide an overview of FGM and its prevalence, and then discuss some of the dominant issues and problems faced by groups who work to end the practice. I will examine why international organizations and African governments have been less successful than local groups, especially local women's groups. Finally, I will suggest that a four-pronged educational approach is the best way for these groups to maximize their influence and hopefully eventually eradicate FGM across the continent.

FGM has been, and continues to be, a significant problem for women in Africa, with recent analysis determining that approximately 3 million African girls and women are cut every year.¹ Between 100 and 140 million girls and women have undergone some form of FGM, including 26 million who have undergone infibulations, the most radical and damaging form of the practice.² Sub-Saharan African countries, along with Egypt and Sudan, tend to have the highest prevalence (the percentage of women aged fifteen to forty-nine who have undergone some form of FGM) of FGM; however, there is significant variation from country to country, and even between regions within countries, and this can make it difficult to get accurate data on FGM.³

¹ Alexia Lewnes, "Changing a Harmful social convention: Female Genital Mutilation" *UNICEF*, last modified 2005. assets.unicef.ch/downloads/FGM_English-nov05.pdf, 3.

² Judith Mandelbaum-Schmid, "Mali Takes Grass Roots Approach to Ending Female Genital Mutilation," *World Health Organization. Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 82.2 (2004), 153-154.

³ Lewnes, "Changing a Harmful social convention: Female Genital Mutilation," 3.

As this paper demonstrates, the politics surrounding language in the African context are incredibly complex. This paper does not seek to argue that European languages have no place on the continent: even the first President of Tanzania and passionate advocate of the Swahili language, Julius Nyerere, acknowledged, "English is the Swahili of the world."²⁷ However, a more balanced vision of the public role of African languages is required. Where indigenous *linguae francae* are prominent, they should be institutionalized and accorded their rightful place in the administration of the nation. In many cases, there is already real demographic weight behind this possibility. Higher education and state administration ought to promote African languages, and co-operate with linguists when necessary to adapt them to their modern roles. The development and promotion of indigenous languages in Africa could not only reinvigorate the national identity of these states, but also provide greater opportunities to those who speak African languages. There is no reason why African languages cannot assume more cosmopolitan and modern roles. The time has come to appropriately address the imperial legacy of language on the African continent.

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²⁶ Roy-Campbell. 95.

²⁷ Batibo. 20.