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Globalization and the Role of African Languages for Development

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Abstract
Indigenous African languages are largely eliminated, and marginalized from use. Instead of investing in and using their linguistic, cultural, and human potential, African governments and the elite still continue to channel away their resources and energies into learning 'imperial' languages that are used by a tiny minority of the populations. Against the backdrop of constraining global forces, and Africa's internal problems (wars, repression, and general economic misery), this paper argues that African languages could be the most critical element for Africa's survival, and cultural, educational and economic development. In order for this to happen, however, Africa must invest in this sector of 'cultural economy' as much as it does (should do) in the 'material economy', since both spheres are interrelated and impact on each other.

The theme of my paper is 'globalization and African languages'. But, in light of the impassioned, and often antagonizing, current discussions on the subject of globalization in academic and public discourses, I would like to begin with some personal remarks and reflective statements.

Like everybody else, I am a product of my education. Although my formal and informal education has influenced me to accommodate collectivism more than individualism, I must admit I am more attracted to the political and economic culture of the "free-world" than the controlled political and economic systems, such as socialism, especially the practiced, internally abusive, and outwardly imperialist, Soviet type of communism. Other factors, less communal and more private, which have also contributed to this antipathy include the former Russia's political and military counter-intervention against the self-determination of the Eritrean people.

This does not imply that Western democracies, particularly the US, are absolutely perfect; they too have their blind spots. For example, in *Class Warfare* (1996: 34-35), Noam Chomsky and David Barsamian mention an awesome figure of a starving "six million U.S kids" and poverty "'surging' among the elderly, reaching maybe 15 or 16% of the population over sixty;" lament the destruction of "family values," and claim that American child development and protection schemes do not even match up to those of Uganda (a poor Third World country), which speak of the seriousness of the socio-economic problems facing the West. Politically, too, Western democracies have their contradictions. At a global level, notwithstanding the declared, laudable aims of exporting the ideals of democracy and development to the rest of the world, they often act single-handedly by relying on the superiority of their military and political hegemony. Internally also, in Western democracies power is at times contested, as Hilary Clinton (2004: 51) suggests, not so much as bringing about change but to "keep the other guys away from power over us." Yet, these democracies have the enviable capacity to provide for their citizens, amply and abundantly. They have, moreover, more than any other contemporary culture, the tremendous force to attract and appropriate what Homi Bhabha (1993: 291) calls "the nations of others," and 'Gatherings of foreign tongues, disciplines, discourses, memory, and exiles and émigrés and refugees and

intellectuals,' who have found sanctuary and success in varying degrees. I say this not to please or displease. I write from my own experience of exile and encounters, and, despite the immigrants' ghettoization and their "half-life and half-light of foreign tongues," as Bhabha (1993: 291) puts it, or what Edward Said (1995: 27) calls the pervasive 'web of racism, cultural stereotyping and political imperialism' outside the academia and within, I believe that that is how many of our prominent postcolonial writers, academics, and artists, including the Great Soyinka, Ngugi, and Mudimbe, were shaped and grew to accomplishment. Needless to say, it is difficult to decide which came first--the genius or the canonization effect--but there is direct and circuitous evidence that this would have been virtually impossible without the support, protection, and the intellectual liberalism of the West.

I want also to say that my (ultimate) sympathy for the west or Western model, in spite of the problems, is neither purely self-referential nor based only on "my readings." While perhaps also typical of other post-colonial regions, many of my African interlocutors (community leaders, students, human rights activists, colleagues and friends) in the continent and the diaspora do indeed view the West with deference, while at the same time using its political and economic hegemony for critique as well as for introspection on local (African) policies of governance, ideology and culture.

This African sympathy was not necessarily always there, but is something that has grown over time. The principal reasons behind this change therefore deserve a brief mention, for they provide a vital insight into the palpably forward-looking, political tendencies and hopes, but also intrinsically linked anxieties and doubts, evolving in African groups and communities today. After almost half a century of independence and statehood, African political leaders and intellectuals have accepted their limitations and failures. Academic and creative works—in English and vernaculars—amply confirm that the nationalist agendas of the liberation struggles did not materialize; that they failed to restore the political dignity of their nations, and, above all, that they hopelessly failed to relieve the lives of their populations from the conditions of political and cultural 'violence' and economic 'misery', so elegantly yet graphically described by Frantz Fanon in 1961. And herein lies the core of the paradigm shift in the ways Africans think about the West today: in search of alternative paths, they look to the Western model of development, including its promises of cultural and intellectual liberalism, political democracy, economic capitalism and its new form, globalization, as an attractive, and attainable, mode for progress and prosperity.

However, in spite of the receptive climate in Africa towards the Western model and globalization, the projected expectations of Africans may nonetheless never come true because of the following, compelling reasons.
1. Globalization's greed: As laureate Joseph Stiglitz makes clear, one is because that the current trajectory of globalization is greedy; it is more interested in swift profit making and less in durable and commensurate global development of nations. Essentially masterminded by the world's most powerful economic institutions, the IMF and the World Bank (Stigliz 2002: 11-15), it is geared at enriching the richest nations of the world at the expense of the Third World economies. In his own words, "Even when not guilty of hypocrisy, the West has driven the globalization agenda, ensuring that it garners a disproportionate share of the benefits, at the expense of the developing world" (2002: 7). After making a penetrating analysis of the benefits and costs, he concludes: "No longer is it a question of whether globalization is good or bad: globalization is a powerful force that has brought enormous benefits to some. Because of the way it has been mismanaged, however, millions more have even been made worse off. … The challenge today is how to reform globalization, to make it

work not just for the rich and the more advanced industrial countries, but also for the poor and the least developed countries" (2002: 268).

2. *Intellectual and political weakness of the African elite:* The second reason is the lack of political will and intellectual creativity and initiative of African authorities, and members of the middle class (intellectuals, academics, political leaders) generally to think hard about how to turn the potential advantages offered by the "new order" to Africa's advantage where it seems useful, or resist its interventions with African solutions where they seem clearly viable. This, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o (*Decolonising the Mind*, 1986) and others have long emphasized, has always been Africa's persistent problem during modern times, and has deep roots in Africa's colonial past. Though the role of the African elite (educated leaders and intellectuals) was of crucial importance during the nationalist struggles, they have found it difficult to change their "either or" mind set and come up with creative approaches for solving African problems. We know, of course, that such an intellectual dependency is bound up with Africa's economic and political dependency; but this is also because of the burden of Western education on the African mind, as Brock-Utne, quoting Staf Callewaert (1994: 108)**,** sums it up neatly:

> As a rule you cannot expect the educated African to use much energy to reconstruct and problematize the break, by which he or she became exactly what they are; educated in a modern Western sense of the word (*Whose Education for All? Recolonization of the African Mind* 2000: 225).

3. *Discontent of the African populations:* We cannot ignore the growing discontent of the African populations, when discussing the major problems that Africa is faced with against the backdrop of globalization. If, driven by nationalist aspirations, African masses in the past allied themselves with the political and intellectual elite in the fight against foreign rule, that kind of alliance continues to dim. Indeed, "the leaders of the African struggles against colonialism and racism [have] spoiled their records by becoming heads of corrupt, fractious, and often brutal regimes" (Partha Chatterjee 1995: 3), while the "emancipatory aspects of nationalism" (Chatterjee 1995: 3) are undermined by the realities of stagnant economies, repression, abuse of human and political rights, ill-usage of resources, frozen institutions, ethnic strife, wars, drought, famine, disease, epidemics, and other kinds of endless emergencies, in turn driving significant sections of the African masses into skepticism and apathy, and others into wars and ethnic or religious clashes.

2. Questions and theoretical premises of development

I begin with the questions that emerge from this picture of the African condition. One: what then should African governments do to face the tide of globalization? how can they respond to the challenges and pressures of the global order, while preserving their culture and ameliorating the living conditions of their people? Two: what should be the role of the African intellectuals in this effort? Three: how to deal with the division between the population and the elite?

This set of questions can be summed up into one major question: "How can Africans meaningfully connect with and respond to the demands of the global order, without compromising their cultural values?" To be prescriptive is risky, especially because of the admixture of economic, plotical and cultural issues and difficulties that continue to mire the continent. Yet, if we accept the basic premise that economic and cultural categories are closely related and influence each other, it can be contended that a change in one of these fields will automatically affect the other. The seemingly rigid differentiation between the

categories of "material economy" and "cultural economy" look even less distinct if we allow for the fact that both economy and culture are man-made constructs—i.e., human choices—which envelop or overlap with the interests of particular groups of people or countries of particular, historical or geographical spaces. In the sense I use them in this paper, "material economy" means the generation of tangible, material wealth by countries, based on sustainable local means of production, and fair distribution and consumption among the population. "Cultural economy," on the other hand, refers to the wealth that is produced through people's culture, literature, and language when perceived as commodities. Because intangible and thus difficult to quantify in statistical terms, mainstream economists have seldom been able to structurally enumerate the input of the cultural economy in the African context, but the achievements of cultural economy are clear when one thinks of language, for example, as an instrument of knowledge, and the different literatures produced by African writers as carriers of one's native worldview and consciousness (as in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*); as attributors of meaning to experience (as in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*), and as articulation or formulation of problems, anxieties and solutions (as in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, and Beyene Haile's *Duqan Tibereh*). This analysis complements what Partha Chatterjee states in his analysis of postcolonial societies (*The Nation and its Fragments*, 1995), when he makes the point that the basis for postcolonial nationalism existed well before the beginning of the struggle against the "imperial power." In his argument he divides "the world of social institutions and practices into two domains—the material and the spiritual," and makes the following assertions: "The material is the domain of the "outside," of the economy and of state-craft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain, then, Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an "inner" domain bearing the "essential" marks of cultural identity. The greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctiveness of one's spiritual culture. This formula is, I think, a fundamental feature of anticolonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa" (*NF* 1995: 6)**.** Though Chatterjee writes with a different concern in mind, merely assuring the singularity of Third World culture in this way makes it appear as if it is just a "unique treasure" to be maintained, and not as something dynamic, and which can be used to serve as a real agent of economic transformation, too. The powerless cannot be sure indeed of the vitality of their cultures if it is not as well explicitly made clear to them that the forces of change are also in reality in the "inner" domain, something that Chatterjee affirms is within their hold.

In this regard, two other voices speaking on behalf of the Third World countries, Chomsky and Samir Amin, see a different way out for their development. Chomsky states that if any country or continent "wants to develop it's going to have to do it the way every other country [or continent] did, by not closing itself from international markets, but by focusing on domestic development, meaning building up its own resources, protecting them, maintaining them" (*CW* 1996: 42). This is developed further by Amin in "The Challenge of Globalization: Delinking". Amin identifies and discusses three "theoretical options" that Third World countries have in facing globalization: (a) Fostering their development through complete appropriation of the system "as it is", and play the "game of international competition," (b) Reform the system by acting to "change [it] in a direction favourable to a 'better' (and even 'fair') globalized development," (c) 'Delinking' or partially negating the system—if necessary, by standing "aloof from such a world system" (Amin in *Facing the Challenge* 1993: 132).

For Amin, appropriation is not a viable option; it is both "short lasting and fragile." The dream of harmonizing the "world through the market and hegemony" is theoretically contradictory to capitalism's internal 'history of continued expansion and competition'; at the practical level, the rules that govern the "game" are unstable, and (always) changeable, contingent upon the inter-economic challenges and needs faced by the Western nations at any given time (*FC* 1993: 135). The second option is constrained also by the same reasons. Though unilateral efforts on the part of the Third World to cope with the system may result in creating new, local or regional "centres" of "industrialized peripheries," nonetheless, these cannot but "become a sort of modern putting-out system, controlled by the [international] financial and technological centres" (*FC* 1993: 133). The only possible and meaningful way for Third World development is through "delinking." According to Amin, 'delinking' comprises a number of strategic elements and conditions that should be met, including the necessity of internationalist solidarity among "the peoples of the three regions (West, East, South)" so that creating a "polycentric world" built on mutual interests is possible, and the reconciliation of the antithesis between universalism ("general interdependence" between North and South), and particularism ("the legitimate concern for self-reliance") becomes feasible (*FC* 1993: 138). For this the crucial requirement is that there must not only be sufficient room for maneuver for each party that "would make possible the implementation of the specific policies required by the diversity of the objective situations," but also, and more importantly, the idea of "unilateral adjustment advanced today in theory and practice [by the forces of globalization]" recede to the logic of "mutual and reciprocal adjustment," in such a way that the "external" preconditions of the strongest regions allow for "the needs of internal development" of the poorer nations and continents (*FC* 1993: 138).

One of the significant ways in which the principle of 'delinking' (prioritization of one's needs over external considerations) can apply is in the area of African languages. It has often been pointed out that these languages hold a great potential for Africa's development, but have been neglected because of various local and global factors. African governments and intellectuals can indeed transform the present crises to their advantage if they consciously detached (= 'delinked') themselves from imperial languages and committed themselves to using African languages with vision, creativity and application. Language is the primary instrument of people's access (or non-access) to education, technological know-how, and scientific and intellectual knowledge, which, in turn, determine the state of the economic well-being, identity and culture of nations/communities. Understandably, the issue of (African) languages has been addressed by a host of scholars. Some have stressed their importance for nation building and societal coherence, and development. Others have made policy recommendations and/or exhibited ways of implementation for their use in schools, state, and public sectors.[1] These voices should have been listened to and dealt with by African governments long ago. Unfortunately, the issue of languages is largely shelved in practice.

This paper argues that Africans can do well by investing their linguistic, human and intellectual energies into the development of their languages, which are used by the majority of the masses, instead of channeling their resources and energies into learning the imperial languages that are used by a tiny minority of the populations. Building on received data and perspectives, I will also provide new and lesser-known facts, and my own critical analyses in support of the argument. I begin with how biodiversity, multilingualism, and multiculturalism are interconnected, and the need for safeguarding them in contemporary society. This will serve as a backdrop for the subsequent discussions not only because it has a general, objective validity but also because it constitutes an important link between language or languages and their users as acknowledged by researchers in the field. I then address the question of African

languages by exploring their present marginalized and deteriorated condition, and answering questions such as "why and in whose interest?" I conclude by raising some relevant points of discussion, and with replies to some earlier posed questions, (counter-) claims, and skepticism, in the context of the challenges and the efforts to put African languages to use for development.

3. The interconnections between biological, linguistic and cultural diversity

The view that biological, linguistic and cultural diversity are interlinked and the source of social progress has been established by the researches of both the sciences and humanities. For example, the 1994 policy statement of the Linguistic Society of America puts the issue thus in the context of a fast growing linguistic and genetic loss worldwide:

> The loss to humankind of genetic diversity in the linguistic world is ... arguably greater than even the loss of genetic diversity in the biological world, given that the structure of human language represents a considerable testimony to human intellectual development. (Quoted in Crystal 2000: 34)

According to Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, it is probably too early to state definitively if there is a 'casual connection between biodiversity and linguistic and cultural diversity'; yet she speaks of vital and profound relationships:

> The relationship between linguistic and cultural diversity on the one hand and biodiversity on the other hand is, maybe, not only correlational. There seems to be mounting evidence that it might be causal. The strong correlation need not indicate a direct causal relationship, in the sense that neither type of diversity can probably be seen **directly** as an independent variable in relation to the other. But linguistic and cultural diversity maybe decisive **mediating** variables in sustaining biodiversity itself, and vice versa, as long as humans are on the earth. (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000: 91)

Pointing at why people should be genuinely and particularly concerned about the preservation of languages, she adds the following:

> Habitat destruction - for instance, through logging, spread of agriculture, use of pesticides, and the poor economic and political situation of the people who live in the world's most diverse ecoregions - has been identified as a main cause of the disappearance of biodiversity. What most people do not know is that the disappearance of languages may also be or become a very important cause.
>> While new trees can be planted and habitats restored, it is much more difficult to restore languages once they have been murdered. (Skutnabb-Kangas in Mair 2003: 33)

Many other literary theorists, anthropologists, and scientists have also stressed that, especially in today's world, the ideal for building up stable and vibrant communities is by creating sustained conditions for an environment of multilingualism and multiculturalism, in which diversity becomes the foundation of unity.

4. The language question

Recent research claims that, in prehistoric times, there were probably between 31,000 - 600,000 languages in the world (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000: 31) but only about 6,000-7000 languages remain in the world today (Crystal 2000: 3, 5). Out of these about one-third are in

Africa, the figure varying between 2035 and above (Heine and Nurse 2002: 1). African languages can be grouped into four major groupings or phyla: Afroasiatic, Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Congo, and Khoisan. The Niger-Congo group contains 1,436, Afroasiatic 371, Nilo-Saharan 196, and Khoisan 35 languages (Heine and Nurse 2002: 1), each of them representing the richness of Africa's linguistic and cultural diversity that orients, shapes and defines the identities of their speakers.

However, despite the assertions about the importance of diversity, and the earnest implications of failing to preserve it, African languages are in fact in bad shape, and it is doubtful whether they can survive the imminent threat of "global uniformity", and serve the interests of their communities in meaningful ways. In the international arena, they are sidelined, and in danger of extinction in their own land(s) of origin. We see linguistic destruction, because of their stagnation, speakers' decline, and negligence. Linguists examine the state of languages by evaluating their situation according to how their present condition is assessed 'safe' or 'not safe' in terms of their continuity to the next generation of speakers. Avoiding the rigor of competing formulations, and rather by focusing on possible points of agreement among researchers, here are some of the categories and definitions. Languages are said to be *extinct* "when they have no speakers left."[2] They are classified as *moribund* when they are "no longer being learned by children" due to the absence of intergenerational transfer of language from parent to child, which in turn may be caused by lack of numbers speaking a language or the absence of society's official recognition for that specific language's status.[3] Two widely cited examples in this category are Latin, and Giiz,[4] but there are also abundant examples from Africa, the Indigenous languages of America, Alaska, South America and Australia.[5] The category of *endangered* languages recognizes a few more distinctions, and according to Stephen Wurm, the differentiation between them is as follows: a) *potentially endangered* languages are socially and economically disadvantaged, under heavy pressure from a larger language, and beginning to loose child speakers; (b) *endangered languages* have few or no children learning the language, and the youngest good speakers are young adults, and (c) *seriously endangered* languages have the youngest good speakers age 50 or older.[6] Languages are labeled *safe* when they belong to none of the above-mentioned categories.

The lack of a well-weighted, pragmatic assessment about every language or cluster of languages does not allow giving a detailed picture of how African languages fare in the light of the above categories. But, according to a recent publication, there is no doubt that many of the African languages that were reported to be there prior to the era of colonization, and some after, are already moribund or dead, due to a complex convergence of socio-linguistic processes and other overt political and ideological factors. Language loss in all the phyla has been massive, of which the most hit is Khoisan. For this grouping Tom Guldemann and Rainer Vossen report that while "in the past the number of languages and dialects may well have exceeded 100, but today only 30 or so still exist" (Heine and Nurse 2002: 99). A great majority of the existing languages of the continent are "potentially endangered", or deprived because they are used neither in schools nor in other official public and state domains. 171 languages (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000: 33) of the continent fall into the category of "endangered and/or seriously endangered" languages. Furthermore, if the present trend continues, the optimistic prognosis for all world languages by the end of the year 2100 is that 50% of them will be dead, while a pessimistic estimate puts the figure at 90% (Skutnabb-Kangas in Mair 2003: 35) and these will include mostly Africa's languages (Prah 2003: 21). By contrast, only seven African languages are officially recognized as *lingua francae* in 16 African countries. Ayo Bambogse (*Social Dynamics* 1999: 16-17) makes the following balance on the basis of

the criterion of their selection as national instruments: "Arabic (Algeria, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan, and Tunisia); Swahili (Tanzania, Kenya); Somali (Somalia); Amharic (Ethiopia); Sotho (Lesotho); Tswana (Botswana); Tigrinya (Eritrea)." To this he adds that "African languages are sole official languages in three countries (Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia) and joint official languages with English or French in seven (Botswana, Burundi, Lesotho, Madagascar, Rwanda, South Africa, and Tanzania" (*SD* 1999: 16). Yet, even this assessment is too generous, because including Arabic in this summary provides a glaring yet inflated picture. The given figure significantly diminishes depending upon the degree to which a claim for Arabic, a major international language and the home language of millions of Arab peoples, is made as an exclusive African language.

5. Where did it go wrong, and in whose interest?

To understand 'what' and 'where' it really went wrong, it is important to dwell upon some of the reasons or processes that have led *or* contributed to this sad situation. One is that hundreds of African languages have remained unstudied or poorly documented. This neglect of African languages and its baneful effect is clear from this account:

> The quality and quantity of the documentation for African languages ranges from fairly high to nil. We say 'fairly high' because no African language has been documented or analysed to the extent of the better researched European or Asian languages. If we define 'fairly high' as having a reasonably accurate and comprehensive reference grammar available, then less than a hundred African languages are in this category. For most, the documentation consists of an inadequate grammar, an analysis of part of the language, an article or two. For yet others, all we have is a reliable word list, or less than that. (Heine and Nurse 2002: 5)

Another well-documented factor against African languages is the hegemony of former colonial, European languages, especially English and French. "The Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures" (a closing statement issued at the international conference, "Against All Odds: African Languages and Literatures into the 21st Century," held in Asmara, Eritrea, January 11-17, 2000) describes this thus:

> We noted with pride that despite all the odds against them, African languages as vehicles of communication and knowledge survive and have a written continuity of thousands of years. Colonialism created some of the most serious obstacles against African languages and literatures. We noted with concern the fact that these colonial obstacles still haunt independent Africa and continue to block the mind of the continent.[7]

Tied to this is the fact that African languages are not represented--not even symbolically-- in the UN and its other institutions. "If you look at the United Nations and all its agencies, there is no requirement for an African language, although *all* the other continents are linguistically represented in the United Nations and Europe has the lions share of that situation" (Ngugi 2000: 159)

Another more lamentable--and ironic-- fact is the stymieing role of the African elite, including political leaders and university professors, who have become accomplices in sustaining Africa's linguistic disaster. If political leaders do so for political expediency, the academics—even though few are frank enough as, for example, Michael Kadeghe to admit it publicly[8]—cannot help getting over the neocolonial education and nostalgia that has set into the linguistic, cultural and ideological system of their thinking. Let me cite some examples from the country of my birth.

During Eritrea's liberation struggle in the 1970s, the department of education of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), one of the two organizations fighting for independence, prepared teaching material for children in the liberated areas, in the Tigre language, the country's second largest language after Tgirinya, spoken by about one-third of the population. Historically, its elite, and noticeably the conservative Moslem sections within its ranks, have a leaning to compromise their own language, which they consider inferior ("of a lower sociolinguistic status"[9]) to Arabic,[10] which in Eritrea is "a product of supra-national ideology and a by-product of global forces of social change" (and thus considered a superior "global and worldly language"[11]). Now, when the political authority of the ELF got to hear about the said project, the scheme of designing a curriculum in Tigre was declared illegal under the pretext that it was not in the organization's 1975 revised, regressive charter, though the 1971 constitution of the same organization had guaranteed that "all national groups of Eritrea have the right to develop their languages" alongside the two official languages, Arabic and Tigrinya (Negash 1999: 57). The end result was deadly: all copies of the prepared schoolbook were ordered to be burned by official decree (1999: 59).

The second is related to my experience as chair of the department of Eritrean languages and literature at the University of Asmara, Eritrea (2001-2005). When the University Senate decided to launch the program, public support, in terms of donations of books and manuscripts, participation in curriculum design, and general moral encouragement that came in formal and informal ways, as well as student enthusiasm, expressed through participation, was huge. But it took a great deal of hard work and nerve-breaking patience (and in spite of the support from some sympathetic elements) to prove the point to many Eritrean faculty colleagues, especially in the departments of English and Education that should have been natural partners, that African languages were after all worthy. The department's record of enrolment for the indicated four years shows few students from the department of English taking Eritrean language and literature courses; there were none from Education. Of course, there were other problems, too. For example, according to explanations delivered by the mentioned departments, the structural constraints inherent in the university curriculum system contributed to disallowing room for participation in the African languages program; but equally true is the fact that there was clear detachment, or lack of any sort of enthusiasm, for flexibility of accommodation.[12] A similar story has been told to me by Dr. Kofi Agyekum, a linguist who has taken the lead to promote African languages in Ghana. It took him three years to persuade his colleagues in the Department of English to include a course on African oral traditions in the curriculum.[13] These are examples from two countries which otherwise have pretty good reputations for their "linguistic nationalism" (Alamin Mazrui 2004: 4), but one could cite numerable examples from other African countries where initiatives and programs to promote indigenous languages have been shelved overtly or covertly.

Besides "political expediency and educational bondage," what other deeper, empirical factors are there to justify the elite's hostility towards indigenous languages?" Alamin Mazrui and Bambogse show that the elites are opposed to African languages because they know or are convinced that their interests, both material and ideological, are best served by keeping the sole status of colonial languages (or in some cases jointly with their own dominant language).

Bambogse, quoting Webb (1991: 5), has put it thus:

> Individuals who are educationally, economically and militarily/politically superior are
> rewarded with access to the best goods and services, rights and privileges, and the most power

and prestige. One consequence of this is that the languages they speak are similarly differentiated, with some of the languages becoming instruments of power, and others powerless. (Bambogse 2000: 16)

Mazrui, who connects the potential role of indigenous languages to Africa's struggle for democracy and human rights, discusses in detail the motives of the African middle classes—both diasporic and home-based—to cling to the imperial languages. He believes that they are afraid to do away the linguistic barrier (the "western linguistic prism"[14]) because accepting linguistic partnership with the masses will, eventually, deny them the power and control over them by exposing them to what he refers as the potential 'semantic challenges' that may ensue from the audience. It is relevant to note that, unlike the adherents of conservative brands of Afrocentrism and pan-Africanism, Mazrui in his discussion does not undermine the "transformability of imperial languages to serve" emancipatory ends (Mazrui 2004: 78). Nor does he, like the followers of the apolitical "world Englishes paradigm" trivialize the issue of African languages by making apologetic claims for what Pennycook calls the "heterogeny argument" which, as he points out, insists on "the neutrality of English, a position that avoids all the crucial concerns around the global and local politics of the language", and by doing so "tends to ignore the broader political context of the spread of English" (Pennycook in Mair 2003: 8). Rather what he is interested in this prompt is in the question who is or not best placed to "speaking for and on behalf of" African languages (Mazrui 2004: 9), and 'why' and 'who' might or not spur an Africa-oriented dialogue and action for the genuine advancement of African languages. Considering the vested interests, it is thus unrealistic to expect the elites who are "traditionally associated with the imperial languages" to be at the forefront of "such a linguistic transformation," and, instead, asserts that "it is only by involving the mass of the African peoples, whose proficiency is tied to the indigenous African languages, as full and equal partners in the struggle to challenge the semantics of the dominant discourse and to inscribe new meanings and uses, that a counter-hegemonic discourse has the potential to arise"(2004: 78).

Finally, there is a curious dilemma faced by African institutions of learning that try to give emphasis to the Africanization of knowledge and education. In *Whose Education for All? Recolonization of the African Mind* (2000), Brock-Utne warns that while Western donors champion equal partnership on paper, at the same time they appear to be foes to Africa's genuine empowerment. In a chapter, entitled "Globalization of Learning—Whose Globe and What Learning?—the Role of African Universities," she demonstrates that "the restoration of African languages and culture" is fundamental "to stop the South's curriculum dependency on the North," and to make possible "an African counter-expertise" to evolve and mature (*WEA* 2000: 213). However, in her view, such initiatives cannot materialize in Africa so long as educational and scientific projects remain hooked in "neocolonial intellectualism," as the Eritrean university chancellor, Dr. Wolde-Ab Yisak, once put it,[15] or in what the Norwegian researcher describes as the 'donor-recipient frameworks' that dictate policy and knowledge in African universities, denying them ownership. Brock-Utne provides several striking cases and reports from across the continent to show the practical, negative workings of the donor-recipient arrangements. Here I draw two examples from the Tanzanian experience to make the point. The first example or case illustrates the dependency of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Dar es Saalam on donor aid, and how as a result the faculty is partitioned among the donors. Brock-Utne here quotes the graphic description of Karim F. Hirji (1990: 23), where he writes:

> As one goes around the Faculty of Medicine, one wonders whether, after a hundred years after Karl Peters landed here, a second partition of Africa is in progress or not. The Dental School seems to be run by the Finnish, the AIDS research program by the Swedes, community health programs by the Germans, with the British, Italian, Danish all having their own corners. (*WEA* 2000: 213)

In the second case she points to the hypocrisy of Western donors, and the struggle of African universities that try to resist donor-driven agendas, and give priority to local needs. According to the author, the Department of Physical Education, Sport, and Culture (PESC) at the Faculty of Education, University of Dar es Saalam (UDSM) was established with the support of Norwegian sport aid, and the Norwegian University of Sports and Physical Education (NUSPE). However, the Tanzanian side were originally not actually behind the thought of having "a degree course in sport," but nonetheless went along (*WEA* 2000: 230). As someone who took part in the negotiations, and using Tanzanian sources, Brock-Utne further tells how the clash of interests played out during the discussions and after the decision was made to start the program:

> As the head of the Department of Educational Psychology, I was present in the faculty meeting when the initiative of the NUSPE was discussed. I remember well the initial lack of enthusiasm for that particular department. It was mentioned that a department of special education might be more needed. Tenga (1997) notes the fact that the degree course offered by the new PESC department puts more emphasis on the teaching of modern sports, and gives a very minimal regard to traditional African sports and games. He also notes the struggle in meetings and exchange of letters between NUSPE and UDSM for the inclusion of the word *culture* in the name of the new department. … It took more than three months to resolve this dispute, after which the word *culture* was reluctantly accepted by NUSPE. (*WAE* 2000: 230-231)

She adds in a footnote that the Norwegians who wrote "most of the articles" continued to call it the 'Department of Physical Education and Sports', even after the Tanzanians insisted "they would always call the department the Department of Physical Education, Sports, and Culture" (*WAE* 2000: 231). She concludes by asserting that "unfortunately this observation holds true for very many projects within higher education in the third world which have made use of development assistance" (*WAE* 2000: 231).

6. Discussion and conclusion: responding to counter and/or skeptical voices

These analyses and observations lead to one conclusion, which can be summed up as follows: There can be no development for Africa, without the indigenization of its linguistic, cultural and scientific institutions. This conclusion, however, also opens up new questions for investigation and scrutiny at the micro (implementation) level. Chief among the questions and criticisms that have been raised by those who forthrightly or indirectly criticize or oppose such Africa-oriented analysis are the following. Some of them may seem trivial; but others point at genuine problems, and must therefore be among the prime concerns of any critical assessment.

1. "*Are African languages adequately equipped to cope with modern realities?*" is one of the frequently asked questions that one hears when the issue of promoting African languages is raised. Some say that African languages may be effective for daily interaction but not for coping with the demands of modern, high technology, science, the arts, literature, cinema, the internet, international communication of diplomacy and trade etc., all aspects of a too

complex contemporary world. Although "they may have in fact changed their positions" over time, historically such a position has been advocated even by very distinguished, African writers (Ngugi 1997: 54). As Ngugi--who has 'certainly changed his position'--admits ruefully:

> When in 1963 Obi Wali, in his now classic article, "The Dead End of African Literature', in *Transition* magazine no. 10, argued that the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium of educated African writing had no 'chance of advancing African Literature and Culture' and that it would end up only producing 'a minor appendage in the mainstream of European literature', he was met with responses ranging from disdain to outright hostility by the leading lights of African letters. Wole Soyinka demanded to know 'what Obi Wali has done to translate my plays or others into Ibo or whatever language he professes to speak'. Chinua Achebe was later to write defiantly that he had been 'given the language and I intend to use it'. Ezekiel Mphalele was even more forthright in his embrace of the English language, at times he wrote as if he ascribed mystical political powers to European languages. (…) And finally, I remember, in an interview on English as a second language on the BBC sometime between 1965 and 1966, how I went on and on about the advantages of writing in English as against writing in African languages. (Ngugi 1997: 54-55)

In the present days, such a thought has been re-articulated, for example, by Ali Mazrui who remarks that "a conference of African scientists, devoted to scientific matters, conducted primarily in an African language, is for the time being sociologically impossible" (Quoted in Brock-Utne 2000: 214). This is based on misconceptions about languages and behooves scrutiny. From a theoretical viewpoint, it must be reiterated (after Chomsky and others) that languages are "creative" and it is in their nature to develop, changing in time, and adopting to new conditions. Thus, "there are no 'primitive' languages—all languages are equally complex and equally capable of expressing any idea in the universe. The vocabulary of any language can be expanded to include new words for new concepts" (Fromkin and Rodman 1993: 25). Empirically, too, the history of languages invalidates such an assumption. If we take for example the case of William Shakespeare and the history of the English language, when he wrote he did not have more vocabulary at his disposal than many African languages possess today—estimations vary between 17,000-30,000. Even more useful to remember in this context is the fact that there was no dictionary of English when Shakespeare wrote. Still, he produced world masterpieces by using the lexicography available to him, and by coining over 2000 words, thus extending the vocabulary of the English language.[16] It was by using the validated methods of borrowing, compounding, and other derivational and inflectional forms (Fromkin and Rodman 1993: 64-65) that he enlarged English and enriched it with new terms and concepts. There is no reason why African languages cannot develop through the same process. Though they are less known outside the region, because, as Jeyifo (1995: 183) remarks, only a few "are available in published English texts," one can also draw similar lessons from the examples of Ethiopian writers like the playwright Tsegaye Ghebremedhin, and the novelists Addis Alemayehu, Bealu Girma, and Sibhat Ghebre-igziabher, and the Eritrean authors, such as the novelist and playwright Alemseged Tesfai, the poet Reesom Haile, and novelists like Ghebreyesus Hailu, and Beyene Haile, who have proved that African languages can deal with very sophisticate African as well as universal human values and experiences. Beyene Haile, in his 2004 novel, *Duqan Tibereh* ("Tibereh's Shop") has particularly shown how his own language is capable of using Joycean modernist "stream-of-consciousness" technique with traditional, branching and layered modes of African narrative, and Latin American "magic realism." Pregnant with Greek, Roman and African mythologies for which even experienced readers require dictionaries, the book is flawlessly executed, and the author feels no obligation to shy away from discussing political or cultural sensitivities

such as "democracy," "sexuality," and even "masturbation" in his work, by either using existing terms or inventing new ones.[17]

2. *African languages don't have (harmonized) orthographies, which constrains their use for modern purposes:* This is certainly a serious problem. While languages like Tigrinya and Amharic have long standing, native alphabet (Giiz), most African languages have not been able to develop their own alphabet of writing, and several others have been handicapped by lack of standardized variants. Yet, these criticisms are not strong enough for this discrepancy can be easily remedied. There are genuine, recent examples in Africa that can be used as model precedents for others. The best example is Somali. The Somali language was "an entirely oral" language until 1972, but is now also a written language with a standardized system of writing (Andrezejewski and Andrezejewski 1993: 1). Similarly, most languages of Eritrea, which did not have a written tradition until recently, have followed suit, and are today being taught in schools using the Latin alphabet. There is also much work going on at The Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society (CASAS). CASAS is a pan-African research institution, led by professor Kwesi Kwaa Prah, and located in Cape Town, South Africa. According to an announcement by the institution for a conference to be held in Addis Ababa, the center strives to harmonize and standardize African languages and works to stimulate "the production of literature for education and development."[18] The organization further declares the following, summarizing its important achievements, and method of work thus:

> Over the past seven years CASAS has been harmonizing the orthographies of the major language clusters, which enjoy mutual intelligibility of 85% or more. The rationale behind this is that at that level of mutual intelligibility it is possible to revise and remove the orthographic differences which have emerged between these languages on account of the fact that different and often rival missionary groups produced orthographies without much cognizance or regard for profound structural similarities between these languages.
> Such orthographic revision has the clear advantage of economies of scale. So that instead of producing literature for a million people it is possible to produce literature for twenty or thirty million. It has also the advantage of upgrading spelling systems and simplifying them for readers and writers.
> Along these lines CASAS has already harmonized languages like the Gbe, Mandenkan, Akan and Gur in West Africa; preliminary work has been done in East Africa on Acholi/Lango /Luo, Ateso/Karimojong, Luganda/Lusoga/Lugishu and Runyakitara (Toro, Nyoro, Kirwanda, Chiga, Ankole). In Central Africa the languages of Malawi, Zambia, part of Mozambique have been harmonized.
> In 2003 work on the harmonization of the South African languages was finished. These orthographies have been reviewed and tested and are suitable for introduction to the readership.

There is more ground for optimism. According to an article in the New York Times of November 12, 2004, in addition to the harmonization and standardization efforts, "across the continent, linguistics are [moreover] working with experts in information technology to make computers more accessible to Africans who happen not to know English, French or the other major languages that have been programmed into the world's desktops."[19] Motivated by market factors, website giants like Microsoft and Google seem keen to integrate some of the major African languages into the cyberspace, while linguists, rightly, embrace the development as a welcome by-product of the information age, and seek to increase the incidence of using and accessing as many African languages as possible on the internet, but also for the "preservation" of the "so-called minority languages," and quickly vanishing ones.[20]

3. "*Keeping in mind, the linguistic and ethnic diversity of many African countries, don't these states need a unifying, national language or languages? and which languages, and on what criteria are those languages to be elected?*" are further questions asked by many. Grass-root African citizens raise them because, among other things, they want to see their own languages included; researchers are puzzled by this problem because they want to avoid the dominance of the politically privileged languages over the marginalized ones. It is thus in this context imperative for African governments and language policy makers to make sure that the choices of *lingua francae* (unifying languages/official languages) are made on the basis of democratic principles and decrees, as well as supported by the majority of the population. It is also crucial that such principles and decrees not only merely guarantee the right of every African language to develop and to be used at schools of minority communities, but also create the necessary conditions for its actual use and development—by supporting initiatives such as that of CASAS for example.

4. *What will be the role of imperial languages in the context of Africa's linguistic nationalism?* It must be affirmed, unambiguously, that the imperial languages, particularly French, Portuguese, and English, are part of Africa's neo-colonial linguistic heritage, and have a role to play in connecting Africans to each other and to the global world, without which inter-African and international communication in the fields of science, trade, technology and cultural exchanges would, at least at this historical juncture, be impossible. However, while still admitting their significance, it is important to look for other socio-linguistic models, from which Africans can draw lessons profitably. Some speakers of smaller European languages (especially the Dutch, and the Scandinavians) have a great reputation for their command of the English language. This, however, has not resulted in replacing or weakening the use of those languages in daily communication, the media, literature, parliament, schools and universities. This is because their owners have accepted the dualism of using English as a global language for external use while at the same time effectively maintaining their language for national purposes. It is thus also possible for individual African nations to emulate such a "dualistic model." If this choice is regarded effective, Africans must, however, also acknowledge another factor that is pertinent to the context of international languages in Africa. For example, the kinds of English(es) used in Africa are largely of "a non-native variety of English." (Arthur in Rubagumaya 67) Though postcolonial African writers like Ngugi, Soyinka, and Achebe have been successful in creating "new Englishes," (Mair 2003: xviii) and in spite of the claims made by researchers and scholars to legitimize the varieties spoken at the local level, it is no secret that these Englishes are largely considered as deviant and unacceptable by mother-tongue speakers of the English language. In the absence of indications to the contrary, one fears that the stigmatization and peripherilization on the account of their aberrancy will thus continue. I agree fully, therefore, with Jo Arthur's analysis and conclusion. Arthur is a native teacher of English who works in Botswana and, having carefully studied the Botswanan case, he concludes that, since the English language is hardly used for "creative," or "regulatory" or "heuristic" purposes, it is best to view the English language as primarily having an "instrumental" function in Africa (Arthur in Rubagumaya 67-69). Because "there is a clear need to teach English," he stresses, "English must be taught as a foreign language for explicitly instrumental purposes," and it is advisable to "*teach it well*," in order that African children acquire the expected proficiency as L2 learners of the language (Arthur in Rubagumaya 76). On the other hand, he states, "the more fundamental aim of making a broad and varied primary curriculum accessible to pupils cannot be achieved through the medium of English," a domain which, according to him, must be left to an African language, "Setwana [that] offers the rich functional resources needed for this crucial educational task"(Arthur in Rubagumaya 76).

5. Finally, "*Isn't it also true that ideologically privileged African languages cannibalize oppressed or marginalized African languages even more than European languages?*" The cannibalization of oppressed and marginalized languages by more powerful African languages is indeed a serious problem, and has been widely discussed, among others, by Brenzinger, Heine and Sommer (1991) Alamin Mazrui (2004) and Negash (1999). Dwelling on the case of Amharic and Tigrinya, two closely related, yet politically and historically contesting, African languages, I for one am particularly on record not only for exhaustively discussing—and according to my critics too rigorously and fervently—how the processes of 'power, centering, and marginalization' work in practice, but also for showing how those mechanisms were as well sustained by Western scholars who, through preconceived analyses and representation, actually helped the prejudices and injustices to continue. Jan Blommaert, in his response to the *Asmara Declaration,* has also given an interesting twist to the discussion of inequality among African languages. The gist of his thesis is that even if the equality of African languages was achievable at a macro level, there will still be inequality within the dialects of the same language, since it is impossible "to make available the power varieties of languages - any language so chosen - to all citizens."[21] Quite evident in this line of thinking is, nonetheless, that each and every variety of a language is equally important and sustainable, a romantic radicalism which itself is based on the notion of linguistic or national "purity", from which the author obviously distances himself.

As long as Africa and its languages are still in unfinished process of decolonization, it is important, then, to first focus on the victimization of African languages by each other, and by the international "killer" languages. At the same time, what Jan Blommaert perceives as a serious problem (i.e. the inevitable disparity in power between varieties within a language) is, like in all established languages, an issue that must be tackled once and after Africa's languages have acquired printed diglossias, shared by the majority of their owners. As Chomsky and Amin have pointed out, it is important to remember that this nonetheless can happen only when Africans work in tandem to mobilizing the resources "within", in terms of policy and application to develop the languages, and opt for a historical 'delinking' in order to empower and protect their languages from "without". The point indeed is that most African languages must first be revived, and their role recognized as vital and indispensable for Africa's over-all development. And by that time—that is when the current concern of elimination and peripheralization of African languages has been stopped and is far behind us, and the ancillary problem of varieties *within* each language becomes an issue—it will also mean that complete de-colonization has been achieved.

Notes

[1] For recent publications, see articles in *Social Dynamics.* 25 (1) and in Brigit Brock-Utne et al. eds, *Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa* (Dar-es-Salaam: E & D Limited, 2003).
[2] Stephen Wurm (1998), quoted verbatim from Crystal 2000: 21.
[3] Michael Kraus (1995), quoted from Skutnabb 2000: 47; Kraus (1992) quoted in Crystal 2000: 20.
[4] A classical language of Eritrea and Ethiopia, is only used today in the Church, and for purposes of research.
[5] Michael Kraus (1992) quoted in Crystal 2000: 20.
[6] Quoted verbatim from Crystal 2000: 21.
[7] Quoted from the original document, "The Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures", Asmara, 17th of January 2000. Also found on the website: http://www.cde.psu.edu/C&I/AllOdds/declaration.html.

[8] See Michael Kadeghe, "In Defence of Continued Use of English as the Language of Instruction in Secondary and Tertiary Education in Tanzania," in Birgit Brock-Utne et al. eds, *Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa* (Dar-es-Salaam: E & D Limited, 2003) 170-186.

[9] Chefena Hailemariam, *Language and Education in Eritrea*: *A Case Study of Language Diversity, Policy and Practice* (Amsterdam: Aksant Academic Publishers, 2002) 269.

[10] This fact is very well documented. See also Ghirmai Negash, *A History of Tigrinya Literature in Eritrea. The Oral and the Written* (p. 55), and the papers presented by Dr. Ahmed Hassen Dehli, and writer Musa Aron at the *First Conference of Eritrean Languages,* Asmara, August 16-18, 1966. Dehli's paper, "Philosophical and Political Depth of Language," contains a particularly revealing section under the sub-heading "The Tigre Language as a Victim of Political Calculations". Dehli's paper is in Arabic. Musa Aron's paper, presented in Tigrinya under the title "Language, Literature, and Oral Traditions of Eritrea," discusses what the author calls "injustice" done to Tigre by colonial powers and its own speakers, and notes it was on the verge of disappearing at one point of time.

[11] In the sense used by Alastair Pennycook for English. See "Beyond Homogeny and Heterogeny: English as a Global and Worldly Language," in The *Politics of English as a World Language*, ed. Christian Mair (Amsterdam - New York: Rodopi, 2003) 3.

[12] Refer also *Strategic Plan: Department of Eritrean Languages & Literature*, University of Asmara, 2004.

[13] Dr. Ageykum and myself met in the 2004 SCALI program organized by Ohio University, Athens, USA.

[14] Phrase used by Mazrui in "The Asmara Declaration on African languages: a critical appraisal" in *Journal of the African Language Teacher's Association (JALTA)* (5) 2003.

[15] During the launching of Asmara University's "Development Research Center", November 2004.

[16] See http://www-math.cudenver.edu/~wbriggs/qr/shakespeare.html, http://www.wordorigins.org/histeng.htm, http://www.bardweb.net/words.html

[17] For an initial review of the book see also Ghirmai Negash in the Tigrinya-language magazine, *Hidri* 12 (2004).

[18] "Call for Papers: Harmonization and Standardization of the Languages of the Horn of Africa", Addis Ababa, January 28-29, 2005.

[19] Marc Lacey, "Using a New Language in Africa to Save Dying Ones," *New York Times* (November 12, 2004).

[20] Ibid.

[21] Jan Blommaert, "The Asmara Declaration as a sociolinguistic problem: Reflections on scholarship and linguistic rights", http://africana.rug.ac.be/texts/research-publications/publications_on-line/Asmara.rtf (p. 7)

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