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A CULTURAL APPROACH TO AFRICAN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES

by

Kolawole Ogunbesan

Introduction

It has become a familiar contradiction of the African intellectual scene for African writers who made their names through writing in the European languages to call for the adoption of an indigenous African language as the international language of the continent. As early as 1959, the first Pan-African Writers' Conference in Rome passed a resolution urging African governments to make Swahili the *lingua franca* of Africa. Most recently the well-known Nigerian playwright, Wole Soyinka, has renewed the plea before a conference of African ministers of culture. The Union of Writers of the African Peoples, on whose behalf Soyinka was speaking, aims "to give special encouragement to the literature of Africa in the indigenous languages and at the same time promote the adoption of a single language for the continent of Africa, as an instrument and symbol of the unity of African peoples everywhere."¹ The writers intend to use literature in the indigenous languages to aid decolonization, by accelerating the pace of self-apprehension of the African peoples and contributing to the search for a progressive direction for shaping African society and determining African destiny.

I propose in this essay to examine closely how the denigration of African languages and literatures contributed to the mental subjugation of the African peoples and analyse the role that literature in the indigenous languages can play in re-kindling and making accessible the reality of an African civilization. It is not my aim to make a case for a particular language as a probable candidate for adoption as Africa's *lingua franca*. Rather, I accept the plurality of indigenous African languages, because each is a solid base for expressing African civilization.

Language, the Core of Africa's Problems

One of the tragedies of Africa is that conditions have rarely been consciously created for encouraging a regard of African languages beyond the utilitarian. Undeniably, from the beginning of the nineteenth century European scholars and missionaries have indefatigably researched into African lang-

*accurate knowledge of native languages, were able to amend this outline. And everyone was amazed to find that the Negro thinks and feels as we ourselves think and feel.*⁴

Barriers to the Appreciation of Oral Literature

Not surprisingly, such grudging admissions did not reach down to the mass of Western society, for whom Africa remained a cultural desert. But even within so-called "informed" circles it took every long for the full implications of these collections of African art to register: that Africa had its own cultural traditions, and that the texts recorded by missionaries, linguists and others could be treated as seriously as written forms. Indeed, until lately African oral literature continued to be judged as trivial, lacking in depth of meaning and reference. A great deal of havoc was done by the very people who brought African literature to the attention of the outside world. Very often, for example, collectors forgot that didactic stories told to children were neither treated seriously by adults nor given uncritical credence. Furthermore, the profusion of unannotated texts failed to inform the reader about the social and literary background of the tales, or about the arts of the story-teller. Excessive preoccupation with animal stories (because they were easier to record) to the exclusion of more elaborate creations of the specialist poets created a very narrow view of the artistic value of many African oral cultures, besides sustaining the myth that Africans were "children of nature", simple and unsophisticated.

The world, however grudgingly has accepted the worth of African visual arts, especially sculpture and dancing. But there is a genuine language barrier to the appreciation of African literature. The full power of a literature is always limited to its own linguistic community. The works of such renowned writers as Homer, Dante, Pushkin, and Ibsen are inaccessible in their original form to most of mankind; yet the world has accepted the greatness of these writers on trust.

In addition, an oral literature demands that its critics should be familiar with the peculiar cultural context in which it was produced, for, apart from the problem of translation, it is practically impossible to appreciate the art forms of unfamiliar cultures without help. Editing African oral literature demands more than the usual degree of precision and accuracy with which Western scholars, in their cultural ancestor-worship, annotate Greek or Roman literature, for invariably the differences of background between contemporary Europe and the oral cultures of Africa are often deeper than those between Ancient Greece or Rome and modern Europe. To present collections of

African literature as the "African way of life" without clearly distinguishing prayers, riddles, epic poems, animal fables, allegories, pieces of history, and children's tales from each other is to pander to the prejudice that the African mind is "prelogical" the basis of the absurd reasoning that since Africa is backward technologically she must also be backward intellectually and artistically.

As late as the second half of the twentieth century supposedly "learned" works were published to buttress the myth that African languages had very small vocabularies, that they were very low on the evolutionary scale somewhere between the cries of primordial man and the speech of modern adult Europeans. This myth was created by a movement which transposed the concept of biological evolution to languages and cultures, a part of the false reasoning which equated illiteracy in Europe, often with a low degree of intelligence, with illiteracy in Africa, usually associated with a lack of schools.

The belief that African languages were intellectually inadequate originated during the early stages of contact with the West, before Western education gained ground in Africa, at a time when most often the only medium of communication was a European language which Africans at the time found difficult to use fluently. Consequently, conversation had to be conducted at a very elementary level. Here is an episode in Afro-Scandinavian dialogue from Otto Jerspersen's monumental book on language, first published in 1922:

A Danish doctor living in the Belgian Congo sends me a few specimens of the Pidgin spoken there: to indicate that his master has received many letters from home, the 'boy' will say 'Massa catch plenty mammy-book' (mammy meaning 'woman', 'wife'). Breeze stands for air in general; if the boy wants to say that he has pumped up the bicycle tires, he will say 'Plenty breeze live for inside', live being here the general term for 'to be'.

The real harm was that many Westerners really believed that it was also on this simplistic level that Africans communicated with each other in their own languages. The situation was the same when communication between Africans and non-Africans was conducted in a simplified form of an African *lingua franca* which frequently both parties knew only well enough to converse about the mere necessities of everyday life. Even now, some Western novels and films set in Africa stylize the speeches of African characters in such a manner as to convey the impression of a 'primitive' mentality, not only in conversations between a white and an African who knows little English,

but even when the dialogue is supposedly between Africans speaking their own language.

The Complexity and Wealth of African Languages

Recent research has disproved the assertion that African languages have a very simple structure and shown their extensive systems of affixes, subtle frameworks of tonal features linked not just with shades of meaning but with basic lexical distinctions and grammatical operations, and a wide range of syntactic characteristics such as concords, significance of word order, and methods of subordination of clauses. Studies, such as R.C. Abraham's Yoruba and Hausa dictionaries,⁶ are increasingly demonstrating the wealth of African languages in their vocabulary, syntax or morphology, their vast possibilities of adaptation and scope for expression.

Swahili has shown well enough that African languages contain the requisite mechanism for expressing any idea and that their basic-word-stock, which is as extensive as that of any of the so-called civilized languages, can very conveniently be extended by word-borrowings and new formations in conformity with the spirit of the language, as has happened with other languages all over the world. Swahili has expanded by coining new words for various aspects of modern life. Words have been borrowed from English, such as *television*; but most of the words are of purely African origin. Examples are *ubaguzi* (segregation), *megendo* (black market), *wipitaji* (traffic), and *Upasuaji* (surgery). Beginning as mainly a commercial and religious language Swahili has become the language of politics and journalism, used by the mass media, in schools and cities. It is perhaps the best example of an African language that has shown itself capable of being a vehicle for both modernization and national integration.

The cultural reawakening which has accompanied political independence in Africa is mainly expressed in nostalgia for the African past, but has failed to highlight the positive values of African languages, in spite of the fact that these languages are the repository and tools of African culture. Indeed, the position of the indigenous languages is in most cases weaker than during the colonial period. Apart from Tanzania which has set out to promote the growth of Swahili, other African countries have been content to maintain the language policy fashioned during the colonial era. Therefore, African governments have unwittingly abetted the continued use and expansion of the languages of their former colonial masters as the official languages of their countries without any compunction, partly because the colonial languages provide an easy solution to the problem of multi-ethnicity, but also because of the faulty reasoning that

in their present state, African languages are inadequate for expressing the very refined philosophies of modern technology, politics and economics. Even the Ghanaian government under the late President Kwame Nkrumah, which in many respects set the pace for African consciousness in the late fifties and early sixties, seemed to have accepted the conclusions of a report whose tone shows the depth of disrespect with which educated Africans held their indigenous languages:

It is pointless to teach any of the vernacular languages as a subject in schools; for such insignificant and uncultivated local dialects can never become so flexible as to assimilate readily new words and to expand their vocabularies to meet new situations. Some of these dialects besides not being yet properly standardized, have only lately been reduced to writing and their absence of literature discredits them and the use of any of them as a medium of expression.⁷

To assume that by teaching the European languages in African schools African languages will slowly and quietly fade away is to forget that in fact only a tiny minority use the foreign languages, a fact which has alienated the educated minority from the mass of their people. The African proficient in English or French may have acquired a useful tool for communicating with the rest of the world, but education means more than merely acquiring technological knowledge; and unless he acquires his own languages he is denied access to the sources of his own culture, and is thus deprived of the emotional and social sustenance which a man can only obtain from the culture into which he is born. Professor Robert Armstrong has stated this most cogently:

It is through the language native to us that we become the human beings we are. The language question is therefore intimately bound up with the problem of the respect we bear other people and of our self-respect. If we despise the language of a people, then by that very token we despise that people. If we are ashamed of our own language, then we must certainly lack that minimum of self-respect which is necessary to the healthy functioning of a society.⁸

The Growth and Development of Indigenous Languages

Language is the most reliable clue to the quality of a people's mind. Because every culture grows in its own indigenous language, it is absolutely essential that the individual

should continue to study and use his native tongue in order to retain his basic culture. To limit Africa's language policy to the study of European languages, because they are useful for communicating with the rest of the world and for acquiring Western scientific and technological knowledge, is to suppress the emergence of the true African genius and negate her political independence. For Africans certainly need their own languages in order to understand African civilization and humanism, the African heritage of the past in which are enshrined African identity, philosophy, spiritual awareness, sense of pride and dignity lost during the colonial period. It needs to be emphasized that it will be impossible for Africa to ever regain her true identity if in her educational and national life foreign languages continue to occupy their present unassailable position. Mahatma Gandhi, in his reply to Macaulay's advocacy of education of Indians in English, summed up the dilemma of contemporary Africa:

Is it not a painful thing that, if I want to go to a court of justice, I must employ the English language as a medium, that when I become a barrister, I may not speak my mother tongue and that someone else should have to translate to me in my own language? Is not this absolutely absurd? Is it not a sign of slavery? Am I to blame the English for it or myself? It is we, the English-knowing Indians, that have enslaved India. The curse of the nation will rest not upon the English but upon us.⁹

Educated Africans must accept the blame if they find their indigenous languages inadequate for expressing their new experiences; they must also accept the responsibility of developing these languages. They should learn from the example of the humanists who dethroned the all-important Latin from its pinnacle of sole authority at the end of the Middle Ages and instead enriched French, English and Italian, formerly despised as suitable only for rustics, to the point that these languages have today become world languages. However, it must be stressed that, to elevate African languages from their present position of neglect, a conscious and sustained policy must be fashioned by all concerned--politicians, writers and linguists. African languages will not develop so long as they continue to be used mainly by the uneducated; they must in fact be taught at all levels in schools, even to native speakers.

Only by using their indigenous languages will African intellectuals develop these languages. It is no use complaining that African languages can no longer express adequately the needs of the modern African. Every language grows and develops as the ideas and knowledge of its users grow: as human knowledge

grows, the means of expressing the new knowledge keeps pace with it. Everyone within a community, be he a scientist, philosopher or poet, who is connected with communicating new ideas is also pushing the boundaries of the language. Instead of complaining of the inadequacy of an indigenous African language to express new ideas, or looking up to Europeans to develop this language for him, every educated African must accept that it is he who has failed the indigenous language, by not contributing to it, either in terms of reshaping the language to express his own newly acquired ideas, or in communicating with the masses of his own people in their own language. The common man in Africa, either in commerce or government, is already responding to the challenge of modernisation by adapting his language, either through word-borrowing or by coining new words, to express his new experience. The educated African must put himself at the vanguard of this revolution and harness the creative genius of his language.

Because language is the medium of literature, the growth of African literary heritage is intimately bound up with the enrichment of indigenous African languages. Every African state must urgently accept the responsibility of encouraging literature in the vernacular languages, because only this literature truly defines and expresses African self-consciousness, formulates and critically assesses the values by which African society lives. The most valid way to establish the uniqueness of Africa in the modern world is to teach young Africans to create in their indigenous languages and thereby make the Africans of tomorrow, like their ancestors, producers, not just consumers, of culture. Literature in European languages produced by Africans is no more than an appendage to the literature of Europe. The outside world's difficulty in classifying some African authors, as in the case of Amos Tutola, no less than its vacuous criticism of such "established" African writers as Soyinka, Achebe, and Ngugi, illustrate the fate that awaits the writer who does not write about the experience of his people in their own language. It is only by making African writers literate in the languages in which their inner lives have been formed that Africa can produce first class literature and contribute meaningfully to the literatures of the world.

By writing in the languages of their people, such writers as Shabaan Robert (Swahili) and Daniel Fagunwa (Yoruba) have succeeded in avoiding the greatest threat to African writers who use the colonial languages--increasing isolation from their cultural roots. To deny these vernacular writers the status of international writers is to miss their considerable influence within their respective regions; it is also to miss the influence of literature as a social force within the traditional society where story-telling as an art pervades the very texture of social

existence: it is an organic part of the individual's life in society instead of being confined to the academy and to a few groups. In contrast to the Western concept of the writer as someone ahead of his milieu the vernacular writer in Africa is not so far ahead of his readers as to lose them altogether. By choosing to write for the vast majority of his people instead of the educated elite, he is doing more than courting popularity, he is putting his art to the service of his people and fulfilling an overtly national goal. The late Tanzanian poet, Shabaan Robert (1909-62) said as much, in his collection of essays:

*Perhaps better literature than that from my own wretched pen already exists in East Africa, but the disadvantages of the foreign language in which it is written are not negligible. Africans are forced to get knowledge from it with much difficulty, like children fed from a bottle instead of from their mother's breast. My writing will be in the one important language of East Africa. By this many people will be able to receive knowledge from the breast to which they are accustomed. In this way I will help in some small measure the progress of my country.*¹⁰

Conclusion

It is in its own language that a social group finds the best means to express itself. African philosophy and aesthetics its conception of what is good and beautiful, its solution to problems that confront it everyday, are embodied in and expressed by indigenous African languages and gain much of their authority from these languages. It is impossible for Africans to disregard the languages of their society without disregarding the wisdom of their society, which is expressed in these languages. So, ultimately, the survival and development of African civilization as a distinct entity in the modern world is inextricably bound up with the survival and growth of indigenous African languages.

Footnotes

1. "Declaration of African Writers," *Research in African Literatures*. VI:1 (Spring, 1975), p. 59.
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3. Junod, H.P., *Bantu Heritage*. Johannesburg, 1938, p. 57.

4. Seidel, A., *Geschichten und Lieder der Afrikaner* (Stories and Songs of the Africans) Berlin, 1896, p. 3.
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9. Agence France Presse, *Africa South of the Sahara*. October 13, 1958, no. 495.
10. Shabaan, Robert, *Kielezo cha Insha* (Model Essays). Johannesburg, 1954, p. 81.

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