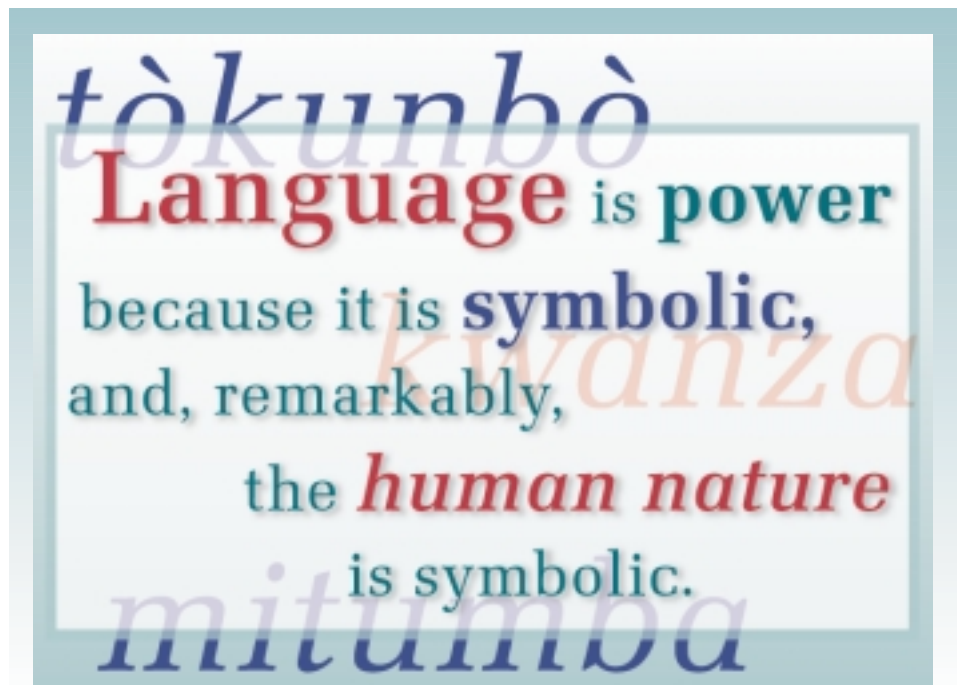


Implications For Language and Culture in a War-torn Continent

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Although taken for granted, language and culture play a critical role in nation building. The African experience has continually affirmed the belief that the level of linguistic loyalty within a society will significantly affect the extent to which the society will be susceptible to external infiltration. Accordingly, “the less nationalistic a society is, the more vulnerable it becomes to penetration from the outside” (Mazrui and Mazrui, 1998). We only have to look at registered success of nations with a designated national language that unites its people under one cultural, political, social, and economic umbrella.

Not many nations in Africa can boast to be such a nation and this can be explained by the fact that many African countries have two or more dominant languages and a multiple number of other languages that represent the numerous ethnic compositions of the populace. The multilingual situation in most countries is, unfortunately, often exploited solely for political gains by the ruling class. Consequently, linguistic nationalism, which is mainly about having pride in the value of one’s language, its use and enrichment, is wrongly characterized in most African countries. Language is continually dismissed as



not being core to the issue of conflict. As a result, there appears to be a unity of effort in economic reconstruction but hardly any form of unification, socially, politically, and culturally.

The fact that the world has not been able to figure out how to deal successfully with the Middle East to bring peace and tranquility between the Israeli’s and Palestinians has a lot to do with the world’s lack of understanding of the crucial role language and culture plays in inflaming or quashing strong sentiments for or against a particular group. The so

called ‘world democracy’ is unattainable when the role of language and culture is not factored into the configuration of what it is that a people cherish and assumes is the fabric that unites them all.

Our Perspective: A General Commentary

The Carter Center in Atlanta previously had a newsletter with pertinent political news about Africa. In this newsletter was a permanent feature, a shaded map of Africa showing those countries that were democratic, mod-

erately democratic, or undemocratic. The democratic and moderately democratic countries have since edged closer to the undemocratic countries in so far as political and social chaos is concerned. Many are now among the countries that are adversely affected by the rise of ethnic war torn regions. Many of these wars are fought by political and economic factions that have been formed along language and cultural differences. This, of course, is natural and to be expected considering the power of language - only if the political elites will begin to recognize its compelling but equally devastating effects.

Language can be used to reinforce patriotism or to fuel strong passions that can result in rage and war. One of the very few countries on the continent of Africa that has been free from civil unrests and war is Tanzania. This has been largely due to the fact that its first leader, the late President Julius K. Nyerere, made it his political mission to institute a national language, Kiswahili, with the sole purpose of uniting the minds of the citizenry to ensure a one voice nation. As a result, due to the peace and tranquility at home, Tanzania has attained the credibility of championing peace and tranquility in other parts of Africa. It has been in the forefront of civil rights, supporting efforts for liberation from colonial powers, and most recently it has become the voice of reason for those embroiled in civil wars in countries such as Rwanda, Burundi, The Democratic Republic of Congo, and before then Uganda, Ethiopia/Eritrea, and Somalia. Tanzania is also the seat

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of the United Nations Rwanda War Crimes Tribunal. Thus, not only has Tanzania been able to sustain nation building within its borders, but it has also used her influence and stability as the basis for the support its neigh-

bors and the continent of Africa need from her.

Africa's hot spots include Somalia, Sudan, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, The Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, and Zimbabwe. These nations are not only at war as a consequence of internalized political, religious, or even racial differences, but also are engaged in wars that stem from economic deprivation. The devastation of these hostilities on the linguistic and cultural heritage of the affected people is not easily quantifiable. In Sudan, the problems of language choice continue to add to the religious and ethnic elements of the civil war. The implication however, is that many languages in the Southern region of the country are becoming endangered due to war.

These wars have recently gained increased world attention, not because there are no conflicts in other parts of the world, but because, whether we like it or not, these wars affect global economies. What is not mentioned is the fact that these wars are as much economic wars as they are political. The fight to have a piece of the pie is economic and those who support the factions by supplying ammunitions and monetary support have a major interest in the regional (if not state) wealth. The language and culture of monetary support is often times not that of the fighters but foreign. It suffices to mention the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angola, Liberia, and Sierra Leone as critical examples. Many of these countries are rich in minerals and or other natural resources that a few are eyeing and

feel that if they are able to control them, they would transform their personal lives and even the communities loyal to them.

Naming these wars “ethnic unrests” takes away the public pressure to name the real enemy and focus on unnamed instigators who are responsible for the utter chaos that results. By putting the blame only on the past, current, or emerging leaders of these regions, it is convenient to create enough confusion in the minds of the populace. As a result, when the citizenry is caught between a life or death option, the voices that make sense are those that offer the hope of life irrespective of how fictitious this hope is. Thus, the language and culture of the war in many of these nations is as much foreign as the ammunitions provided to fight it.

Influences of these Wars on Language and Culture

We would like to designate these wars as ‘economic wars’ to allow for an expansion in the discourse on the so called ‘ethnic wars.’ The economic wars are fueled by the world-wide economic disparities, a disparity shown by the disproportionate number of “haves” compared to the “have nots.” The language of the haves is ‘give me more’ and the have nots is “I want a piece of the pie too.” The rapidly changing world, with expanded technology is pretty challenging to both developing and under-developed nations, most of which are on the continent of Africa.

Even without the added grief of physical warfare, African nations are

dealing the linguistic and cultural battle to wade off the suffocating influence of westernization. Cultural vibrancy and adaptation are crucial elements for developments but it is also important for the culture bearers to also have an input in the direction of these changes. In most of these countries, the people often have little or no input. Consider cell phones, uncensored internet, electronic and print media that focus on marketing the West in order to satisfy the youths’ appetite for foreign culture that is spreading faster and wider, catching mostly the young through TV programs, music CDs, foreign films on TV, video, and more recently DVDs.

While a cell phone might appear a necessity in the West, it is a luxury for 99% of the people who live on the continent of Africa and yet it has become a class status symbol. Needless to say, most of these young people do not have adequate education to analyze the implications of the mixed messages that are transmitted through the television, print media, and the internet. It is important to note here that many of those who use the internet do not own computers; internet cafes are fast growing franchises, owned largely by foreigners and westernized elites. TV programs or internet access are not available in the local languages. The few local TV programs that are, at least, appealing to the viewer’s sense of national or continental history have already been blocked out by the bombardment of what the ‘virtual’ future will look like and what kind of a person will best

survive in it.

In physically war torn regions, desperate youths are easily lured by the language and culture of war that promises a better and brighter future after conflict. Obviously, these young people are not sophisticated enough in the analysis of what they are hearing or reading about and are overcome by illusions of wealth. The power behind the discourse is the sole driving force that facilitates the enticement. An opportunity to support a ‘rebel leader’ whose language promises a share of the loot at the end of the struggle is far better than the language of the ‘nationalist revolutionary’ that promises the task of nation building.

Scholars working in the area of language and power remind us that power may allow one or more individuals to impose their will on another or others. They can also determine what is possible, what is right or wrong, what is rational, and what is real. This is possible because power is a product of human activities, just as the activities are themselves products of power relations in the socioeconomic world (Fairclough, 1989). Language is power because it is symbolic and remarkably, the human nature is symbolic. These symbolisms transform us from biological creatures, who respond to the concrete world as it exists, into thinking beings that interpret, interact with, and remake our world through symbols (Langer, 1953, 1979).

The symbols we use shape our understandings of the world and our own places within it. The power of symbols lies in the kind of thought

and action they enable. Symbols allow us to define, organize, and evaluate experiences and people, think hypothetically and reflect on ourselves. The language that we use selectively shapes our perceptions. The names we apply emphasize particular aspects of reality and neglect others. Language names what exists. The world is named by those who hold power, and what affects those people in what they notice and acknowledge with names.

As noted above, power is reflected in language and language exists in power and behind it. Language conventions, and acceptance of them, replicate and validate the existing power structure. Furthermore, powerful participants (attempt to) control and constrain the distribution of non-powerful participants, through constraining contents of usage, relations entered into, and subject position occupied. These constraints derive from the conventions of the discourse type which is being drawn upon. In this respect, language is not neutral. It reflects cultural values and is a powerful influence on the user's perceptions. It is, therefore, not surprising to us that armies in war torn regions on the continent of Africa are largely composed of innocent children and young people who would otherwise be doing juvenile activities rather than brutalizing and killing innocent people.

Preservation as an Economic Strategy

The preservation of African languages and culture is the road map to the sustainability of the African economy. For many, this may be a hard sell,

especially those who view economic stability as a product of material production and marketability. Of course, if there are no products to manufacture or sell, no revenue will be generated. However, language is the power behind conflict and conflict resolution and the power behind economic viability. This has been discovered by the Coca-Cola Bottling Company wherever it is strong in Africa and is able to shut out the Pepsi market. In Tanzania, for example, Coca Cola Kwanza (Swahili word for 'first') discovered that ads that depict young people in social settings that are culturally connected to the people increased their selling power. Also, the Coca-Cola ads did not use English (compared to many other ads on highway billboards that use English and are geared towards catching the eye of the affluent working class) but rather Kiswahili, the language that appeals to the young people and the blue collar workers who might not be able to afford a beer (costs 80 cents, compared to coca cola (20 cents).

The choice of the term 'kwanza' appealed to the younger generation because it invoked, in a very subtle way, a competition with the intention to win at all cost. In order to be considered 'first', one has to compete fiercely and work hard to keep the position when attained. It made the young people feel that if they drank Coca Cola, then they are superior to those who drink Pepsi. This power of language and its irrefutable influence on culture is not fully exploited by local merchants. Interestingly, and sadly too, locally owned franchises

across Africa bear English (sometimes colloquial English) advertisement. The reaction you get from customers is that the store that advertises in the local language has cheaper and perhaps locally made merchandise while those with English advertisements are more expensive and perhaps has high priced imported goods.

African consumers, seem to have developed a bias towards imported goods even if they are used goods (commonly known as 'mitumba' in Kiswahili or 'tòkunbò' in Yorùbá). This does not help the local or national economy if most of the goods sold are imported. Starving local industries means lost jobs in both the manufacturing and trading sectors. Culturally, the bias help to create differing views about locally and foreign owned franchises. If the power behind language is geared towards the support of more locally owned markets, then more people would be drawn to spend their money at these markets and encourage the manufacturing of more local products. The ability to manufacture more local products means that more people would be employed, especially the youth who are increasingly the majority of the unemployed in many African countries.

It would also mean that the youth would grow to appreciate their own indigenous culture and take pride in locally manufactured goods that bear out the overall culture. Significantly, the unemployed and disenfranchised youths have become the most recruited groups in the countless wars of liberations and rebellion all over the continent. The sad irony in war torn

regions of Africa is the little or no presence of war related industries (good or bad) in these regions. The weapons that Africans use against one another in battle and the materials used to heal, rebuild and recreate access are often imported. War in many parts of Africa is an unpleasant and malevolent situation but the issue of those benefiting from the language and culture of war needs to be addressed. Those who insist on a language and culture of change in Africa must begin to realize the enormous importance of language to nation building and sustainability.

In this short commentary, we have attempted to identify some of the implications of the different forms of war that are ongoing on the African continent. In enumerating the variations in the political, economic, cultural, linguistic and military wars, we concluded that preserving African languages and cultures will greatly affect the incidence of war and help address the implications of war.

African languages and cultural studies as well as African languages and cultural understanding must receive a fair representation in popular media and the academy. Patriotic and nationalistic efforts in Africa must also be constructively channeled towards linguistic and cultural development.

The damaging effects of these varied wars on the African continent must call the attention of all Africans to the need for renewed cultural and linguistic nationalism that is geared towards building up multi-cultural African countries rather than ethnically dominated war zones. This is the

responsibility for the Africans themselves. If Africans do not speak or promote their own languages; if they seek to educate their children only in foreign languages while they ignore and belittle the importance of language as the avenue for cultural understanding and assimilation; if Africans will not buy their own product and work with manufacturers to continually increase quality; if Africans will not consider the language of compromise and inclusion in their political dealings with one another; if Africans do not take pride in their own languages and cultures and allow others to think the language of Africa is African, thus perpetuating the notion that Africa is a country and not a continent; if Africans keep quiet when the media treats Africa as a little dot on the world map, then Africa will never be respected but continue to be used as the launching pad for anything and everything but that which is culturally and linguistically African.

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