

The Paradox of National Unity in Diversity

The Language Issue in Kenya

By Dr. Wa’Njogu J. Kiarie

Language is the medium of culture because culture is socially constructed. Therefore, for all people to have equal opportunity to develop and participate in that culture, they must be equally competent in the language(s) of that culture. However, it is not as simple as it seems, for a paradox underlies the situation: the paradox of whether to mandate a single language (like the case of Kiswahili in Tanzania) or to support many languages (like the case of 11 national languages in South Africa) within that culture. For instance, France and many of its former colonies operate monolingually, while Puerto Rico and Canada support bilingualism. When people speak various languages within a nation, it can be divisive when not everyone engages in socially constructing knowledge and reality, so it facilitates nation-building when all people speak the same language. However, diversity can enrich national development as well when people of the diverse groups can contribute to the nation as a whole. This is because as people resolve differences among the diverse groups, the process can lead to stronger and richer culture. The differences, then, can build strength. The paradox here concerns whether to



develop policies to support a monolingual or multilingual nation. Each has advantages. On the one hand, a monolingual culture has the obvious benefit of everyone’s being capable of speaking with everyone else. However, multiple languages bring strength because of the varied strengths of each language and the strength that accrues from resolution of minor conflicts. Woven together, a culture based on different languages can be strong and rich, probably particularly when

many of its citizens are bilingual and therefore able to speak with many others. When they work to resolve differences, the resulting understanding can be particularly powerful. It is not our purpose to settle the debate about monolingualism versus multilingualism in this article, but it is our purpose to present the history and case of this debate in Kenya. The language issue is highly contentious and complex, and various policies are needed in different contexts.

As Epstein (1978) has shown, the schools help shape national identity through acculturation by preparing minority children for assimilation into majority culture, acting as agents for social change or perpetuating traditional social and political arrangements.

It should be pointed out that such goals of schools and society can be brought about through both the explicit curriculum which is overtly intended and publicly advertised, and the implicit curriculum which consists of learning acquired because of the nature of schools (See McCutcheon, 1995: xv-xvi; Eisner, 1994: 87-97). For example, through the explicit curriculum, students might learn their nation's history and geography. Through the implicit curriculum they might learn patriotism and other values of the nation such as honesty, a work ethic, and love of family. Through the explicit curriculum schools can do more toward nation-building than teaching the nation's values; schools can also be highly instrumental in teaching the nation's language(s).

Diversity is a norm many nations have tolerated and even embraced ever since their founding. There are various kinds of diversity: cultural, racial, and linguistic, just to mention a few. Diversity has been seen by some as a contributor and by others as a hindrance to national development (Villacorta, 1991). Diversity contributes to national development when different people contribute their diverse expertise and knowledge cru-

cial to national development. On the other hand, diversity hinders national development when specific groups segregate themselves from the mainstream and treat themselves as 'inde-

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pendent' groups that cannot make a nation. Good examples are diverse ethnic groups found in many parts of Africa, and minority groups in Europe and America. In most countries characterized by any type of diversity (for

example linguistic), one of the key goals is to encourage national unity to enhance the idea of a nation and to support national development. Linguistic diversity in many parts of the world may have resulted from various factors. One of them is multilingualism (for example, in Africa where people of diverse linguistic background were grouped by colonialists to form a nation). The imposition of colonial rule on other states (or countries) meant the imposition of a language of administration- particularly of education, law, and commerce- in addition to the indigenous language(s). For example most, if not all, of the colonized countries, in Africa still feel the strong influence of foreign languages which have developed to become languages of day-to-day communication in commerce, administration, and education. Foreign languages that still dominate interactions among Africans are English, French, and Portuguese. Another factor is migration caused by social strife, famine, and political instability among other factors (as is the case with Somali, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Ethiopia, and Sierra Leone).

Different countries have approached the issue of linguistic diversity in different ways. Some countries had no choice other than to maintain what had been established and developed by colonialists; namely the maintenance of foreign languages, thereby disregarding the local ones. This happened to be the case with the French colonies. When these coun-

tries regained their independence, they found it difficult to go back to what had been abandoned so long ago. At the same time, most of the “mother” countries maintained strong attachments with their former colonies, and if this was to continue they had to maintain what their colonial masters had set up. In other countries (for example Tanzania before the take-over by the British from the Germans), the colonial administration had not interfered to any great extent with the original linguistic set-up. Despite the many languages that existed, one language (Kiswahili) had already stood out as one that could play a key role in unifying people. Some other countries (like Kenya) decided to maintain both local and foreign languages and by so doing creating diversity in search of unity (although this is slowly being rectified by revising language policies). One of the ways of obtaining unity is through education by having a national curriculum. A national curriculum ensures that everyone is exposed to similar content of material and similar testing. In this case language as a medium of instruction and as a subject plays a very significant role in national unification.

In Kenya (as in many African and other developing countries) linguistic (and hence cultural) and, to a limited extent, racial diversity is a realistic phenomenon people have abided by for a long time. Immediately after independence (in 1963) the goal of national unity became a priority of

the government of the day and everything within its reach was mobilized to achieve it. One of the areas targeted to help in the fulfillment of this goal was education. This was deemed possible through the development of

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a national curriculum. Efforts were made to ‘Africanize’ curriculum in order to make it more realistic, meaningful and applicable to its consumers (the nation, communities and the learners themselves). One aspect of

the curriculum thought to be very important in achieving national unity (and which has remained very sensitive) is the issue of language. Language can be a cohesive force, but also it can cause division and domination (Villacorta, 1991). A national language is very important because, in addition to being a vehicle of communication, it also serves as a defense against foreign cultures. Languages determine the character and the level of people’s social and political development. Language also forms and expresses people’s ideas, shapes their analytical and decision-making skills, and determines the quality and degree of their communication with each other. More important is the fact that national identity and pride are linked with a national language.

In Kenya, between 57 and 80 (Whiteley, 1974) distinct indigenous languages and dialects are spoken, all of which need to be maintained and developed. The biggest dilemma has been how to maintain and develop these languages yet concurrently gain national unity. Luckily enough, by the time of independence, one language had spread and developed to become a common language. This language is Kiswahili, spoken by a large proportion of the Kenyan population (as well as others in Eastern and Central Africa). This language was seen as an ideal unifying force among diverse linguistic and cultural communities in Kenya (Rhodes, 1977). The Kenyan government declared Kiswahili the national language in 1969. Such a

declaration could have meant a change in the language curriculum in order to give this language an opportunity to unite the people as Kenyans and at the same time encourage them to maintain their indigenous languages. Mixed with the indigenous and national language issue is the question of an official language (English), which seems to exert more influence especially given the prominence that it enjoys.

In the pre-colonial period missionaries were the first and the only agency concerned with the language issue in their project of providing Christian education for the local population. As such, the implication was that Muslims, who had settled along the coast long before the arrival of the missionaries, were excluded from this early formal schooling. Yet missionary education was not linguistically homogeneous for it encouraged use of vernacular languages. As such, language could not be relied upon as a tool for national unity on a larger scale. Unity could only be felt on small scale along ethnic lines and if it went beyond, then the only thing possibly uniting people was religious faith. From 1920 to 1960 the problems inherent in any educational policy were those of providing an adequate supply of trained teachers for the various languages, and textbooks in these languages for school children in all areas. It can also be noticed that most of the recommendations and decisions made by colonial policy makers were aimed at promoting the white man's interests. The more Africans remained segregat-

ed and divided (especially linguistically), the better it was for the colonial administration. As the primary aim of internal policy is the fostering of

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forces conducive to national unity, the educational role of Kiswahili as a subject of instruction is being emphasized and that of English as a medium of instruction maintained, while less emphasis is being laid on the educational roles of vernacular languages.

With increased employment prospects in the civil service after independence, however, there was a general trend towards English and away from Kiswahili and the same was for vernacular languages. Even though Kiswahili was made compulsory and examinable subject in both primary and secondary school, the trend in favor of English still persists. English still has a higher status in the political, social and economic lives of Kenyans. However, people (especially academicians) have started expressing the need to review the former policies and revive the native languages. How far this debate will go and its consequences on the language curriculum remain to be seen. Accommodating this development without sacrificing national unity is another issue policy makers need to think about. Overdependence on foreign languages to interpret our own realities has proved to disenfranchise majority of the citizenry for they limit their socio-political and economic participation. If the example of South Africa is something to go by, it is possible to develop and sustain our languages with out putting our national unity at risk.

Dr. Kiarie serves as Lector of Kiswahili at Yale University. His specialization is language education and sociolinguistics. The author's interests include foreign language curriculum development, teaching methodology, material development, and assessment.