

LANGUAGE AS A CULTURAL ISSUE IN AFRICA TODAY .

by

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The question of language today in Africa is probably one of, if not the most fundamental issue, in our cultural politics today. The importance of the question of language is determined by the question of how does a nation choose a national language(s) within a context of the multiplicity of languages. Africa has thousand and thousand of languages, with Nigeria alone, for example, having approximately 248 languages. For sure, many of the languages that form part of Africa 's cultural complexity are spoken by a small number of speakers. Some of the languages spoken by millions, even before the advent of the colonial domination, Swahili in East Africa and Hausa-Fulani in West Africa were lingua francas , that is, languages used in common by multilingual groups. This historical phenomenon of some of the great African languages becoming lingua francas has somewhat reduced the complications involved in choosing a national language. Yet, complications remain still, as it will be apparent in a moment.

So, Africa having this cultural richness in the multiplicity of languages, presents the issue of their possible classification. This question of classification of African languages in the early phases of European colonial history in Africa was the central concern of many European linguists. Today, since the advent of the independence of many African countries, it has preoccupied the minds of many of Africa 's brilliant linguists. Also the great African historian, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, from Burkina Faso , today living in exile in Ivory Coast , has written some brilliant essays on these matters in the early 1960s issues of *Presence Africaine* .

The classification of African languages has led to the attempt to specify the number of language families. The typological criteria for this specification has included the presence of tone, noun classes, monosyllabic roots, sex gender etc. This classification of African languages into several group families has led to various forms of grand syntheses. German scholars of African languages in the late nineteenth-century and in the early twentieth-century like Westermann, Meinhof and Werner, postulated the existence of three great indigenous language families in Africa , the Sudanic, the Hamitic, the so-called Bantu, and with the Semitic group standing at a slightly tangent angle. Each of these three main language families has its own specific characteristics. For instance, the Sudanic family group is monosyllabic, tonal and lacks stress; the Hamitic is polysyllabic, possessing Ablaut variation, etc. The so-called Bantu family group lies somewhere between the two. Though these classifications have pertinence in categorizing the complexity of African languages, few languages in actual fact

exhibit these traits in their full purity. There have been other syntheses achieved from a different typological criteria for classification; but these need not detain us. For instance, the distinguished American linguist, Joseph H. Greenberg, has postulated sixteen language families in Africa .

In recent times African linguists themselves have postulated a different set of great family language groups. Schematically, these are the Afroasiatic languages, the Niger-Congo languages, the Sudanic languages, and the Click languages. The Afroasiatic languages group encompasses: Ancient Egyptian, Semitic, Berber, the Cushitic languages and Chad languages. Classified under Niger-Congo languages are the following: Mandingo, Kwa, Bambara, Wolof, Voltaic, Ijo, Adamawa and others. The Sudanic family language group consists of many languages from the Sudan basin to Egypt . Under the Click language group are the so-called Bantu languages which stretch from South Africa all the way to Zaire , Uganda and Kenya , and the Khoisan languages. The formation of these diverse African languages and their particular structural modes are a central element of Africa 's cultural history. So then, these are only the linguistic complications involved in attempting to give uniformity to a national culture by designating one of the languages in dominance within a national territory as a national language.

Beside these linguistic complications, there are also cultural and historical processes which render the role of language within culture a complex matter. So far we have been considering languages whose historical formation have been totally within an African context. But when we consider languages at the Northern and Southern tips of Africa , we are confronted with an entirely different set of historical problems. Afrikaans in South Africa presents us with the issue of cultural imperialism in African cultural history. Though unquestionably Afrikaans is today an African language, in the sense that its formation and genesis has been in a context of intermingling with indigenous African languages, its arrival in Africa was a process of imperial penetration in that its origins is in the Dutch language of the Netherlands. The Arabic language, which stretches across a greater part of Northern Africa, facilitated the imperial penetration of Islamic religion into Africa . There is this interesting historical phenomenon: whereas the Arabic language has receded back, to a large extent, from its dominance over indigenous African languages in a particular segment of Africa, Islamic religion has not receded and continues to exercise hegemony over large stretches of black Africa , in fact, it has been penetrating deeper. What does this particular experience tell us about African cultural systems: does this mean that African language systems have been much stronger than African philosophical systems in resisting external forms of penetration. Why does it seem that African philosophical systems have been defeated and dominated by European philosophical systems stretching from Christianity to Marxism! Is this

a legitimate way of posing some of the cultural issues facing Africa today! What is the relationship between a language and its indigenous philosophical system which is suppose to be its conveyor? Let me say this to forestall any misunderstanding: Arabs are Africans, and today the Arabic language is an African language, and perhaps Islam is today a central component of African religious systems. These issues are complicated matters which are open to various contentious interpretations. For instance, returning to the question of Afrikaans language in South Africa today, if in 1976 the Afrikaans language was rejected by the African people in the Soweto Uprising, today in 1988 black literature is being written in the Afrikaans language. Is Afrikaans an African language? What do we mean by the concept of an African language! But as I said, these are complicated matters. What I have been concerned with here is conveying a particular historical process affecting cultural matters of language in Africa , rather than drawing political implications from it.

It is generally acknowledged that English, French, Spanish and Portuguese are European languages. Their penetration into Africa was on the back of European domination of Africa . The imposition of these European languages on African languages has been simultaneous with the subordination of African national histories to European imperial histories. While with the national liberation struggles and the independence movements, to a large extent, the hegemony of European imperial histories over African national histories has been lessening, the dominance of the European languages over African languages has been persisting, if not in fact increasing. The index of this domination has been the endless volume of African literature written in the European languages in comparison to the shallow volume of African literature in the African languages. What accounts for this intractable African cultural problem! The dominance of European languages in our African literatures stretches from Wole Soyinka in Nigeria to Neruddin Farrah in Somalia , from Mario de Andrade in Angola to Leopold Sedar Senghor in Senegal . Within particular African countries this pattern repeats itself. For example, in South Africa the writings of Ezekiel Mphahlele written in English enjoy a greater reputation than the epic poetry of Mazisi Kunene written in Zulu. This fascination with European languages is mainly confined to intellectual and elite sections in Africa . The majority of the African people have not been touched by this form of the sweep of European imperial history in Africa , for they still continue their cultural existence within the structures and processes of African languages. So then, it is evident that the persistence of the dominance of the European languages in Africa is within particular classes, namely, the ruling classes and the petty-bourgeois intellectuals. The question of overthrowing the domination of European languages over African languages is as much a cultural issue as it is a political problem. Ngugi wa Thiongo in Kenya is one of the few writers who has been trying to break out of this vicious imperialist circle. The importance of this writer in present African

cultural history will be indicated in a moment.

Though the European languages in Africa are unquestionably part of the European imperial intrusion into Africa, they paradoxically act as a unifying force in many of the African national territories. This is because these languages possess the uniqueness of being lingua franca in many of the African countries. This is the real conundrum of these languages in African cultural history. These European languages are simultaneously political forces of unification among us while at the same time they are cultural instruments of domination on us. It is probably here perhaps that seems to lie the historical unresolvability of this complicated problem of language in Africa. But this has been worsened by the seemingly impossibility of many African countries to choose an African language (s) as a national language within a context of the multiplicity of languages. This inability is governed by the fear that in choosing one language over others it might trigger the political forces of civil war. The example of Nigeria is classic in this instance. But other examples could be equally adduced. This makes it clear again, that politics as well as culture underpin the language issue in Africa.

One thing has been clear through all this complicated process is that the persistence of the dominance of the European languages has had a deleterious effect on African cultural systems. Could it be that the absence of original African philosophical systems in modern times is tied to the fact that we use languages foreign to our thinking patterns or logical procedures. What is the relationship between language and philosophy! Since we are here in Germany, what can the German language teach us about this matter? Could it be doubted that whilst the genius of Wole Soyinka enhances the greatness of the English language, the Yoruba language is slowly atrophying and perhaps dying suffering from lack of constant nourishment. What is to be done? Is the path opened by Ngugi wa Thiongo the only way out of the dilemma in which we in Africa find ourselves? In concluding this short presentation, it is necessary to pause and reflect on the historical phenomenon of Ngugi wa Thiongo.

The actions and thoughts of Ngugi wa Thiongo on the question of language within cultural processes has undergone a recent revolutionary transformation. What are the structural coordinates of this change? Ngugi began writing his creative works, consisting of novels, short stories, critical essays and dramatic work, in the English language. He then, in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, perceived the utilization of the English language for literary purposes as a natural choice, whereas in fact it was an externally imposed historical condition. This cultural mis-perception was not only confined to Ngugi wa Thiongo, but also deflected the literary and historical visions of the following writers: from Nigeria, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara and John Pepper Clark; from Malawi, David Rubadiri; from Sierra Leone, Lenrie Peters; from Kenya, Ngugi

wa Thiong'o and Grace Ogot; and from South Africa, Lewis Nkosi, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Bloke Modisane. I name these writers purposely, for it was specifically these writers who were assembled together in Kampala in 1963 at the famous or infamous Conference of African Writers in the English Language. These writers were assembled together to celebrate the cultural significance of the English language in Africa. Ngugi was among the constellation of these writers. Obi Wali, the Nigerian literary critic, disagreed with the whole tone of the Conference, for he argued that African writers should write their literary works in the African languages and not in the European languages. This assembly of writers poured scorn and contempt on Obi wali. To prove his point, Obi Wali, wrote a huge novel in the Ibo language.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his latest critical works and prison memoirs, **Writers in Politics**, **Barrel of a Pen** and **Detained**, has mentioned the historical importance of this Conference in the sense of having given mis-direction to a whole generation of writers. Ngugi also includes himself among those who were at the time of the Kampala Conference were labouring under neo-colonial cultural illusions, should we not say, delusions. Perhaps the primary reason why it was specifically Ngugi and not any other writer who saw the mistaken ways of insisting in writing literary works in European languages rather than in the African languages, is because in Kenya than in any other African country the colonial-white settler culture was much stronger. It was this confrontation with the colonial-white settler culture in Kenya, which analyses with remarkable brilliance in **Detained**, besides his then developing Marxist convictions, that made him return to his roots, that is, to his national language, Kikuyu, and to the Kenyan national culture. Ngugi has moved even further to articulate a people's culture. As we all know, for approximately the last decade, has been writing his creative works in Kikuyu, and has announced recently in his latest critical work published in London last year (1988) in the English language, that also his critical works will now be written also in Kikuyu.

Though the historical pathways indicated by Ngugi wa Thiongo as to resolving the intractables surrounding the cultural politics of language in Africa today are valid and still open to the judgement of African history, they themselves display their own complications. Remaining within the cultural context of Kenya, which has been utilized in this instance as a particular example representing critical cultural problems facing the African continent, with differential variations here and there, if the various writers in that country were to write their literature in the various languages in existence in that country, how would these various literatures in the different languages constitute themselves to form a Kenyan national literature! To go even further, how would these literatures constitute a Kenyan national culture. What do we mean anyway by the concept of a national culture. To go even still further, how could these literatures forming a structural

landscape of Kenyan national literature forge a singular political consciousness among the masses of Kenya 's peoples. These are some of the issues which arise when we follow the cultural logic of the historical corrective indicated by Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

Posing these issues does not by any stretch of the imagination invalidate the correctness and brilliance of the pathway advocated by Ngugi. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's awareness of the issue of writing African literature in the African languages and his concrete undertaking to resolve this issue is, beyond a doubt, a stroke of genius. Nonetheless, a cultural and historical question has to be posed to Ngugi: Wouldn't it be historically better and culturally sounder if the Kenyan national literature were to be written in the Swahili language which in recent years has become a national language in Kenya rather than in the other Kenyan 'ethnic' languages! Is it not true that there is already a strong and vibrant literature in Swahili in Kenya ? Is it not better to consolidate this developing tradition which has a better chance of forging a progressive political consciousness! Would not the concept and structure of Kenyan national history be better articulated by a literature written in the Swahili language rather than in the various components of other Kenyan languages? Anyway, what defines the concept of nationality of a particular country's national literature: is it the geographical spread of the language in which it is written covering the whole national territory or is it the vertical amplitude of the historical consciousness of that nation's history? Or is it a dialectical synthesis of both. Is the concept of national literature the same in a capitalist system as it is for a socialist system? What is the historical nature of the differentiations and variations? These are some of the which emerge from the cultural logic that traverses the historical pathway chosen by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. He is one of the great figures in African cultural history.

It ought to be clear that posing the issue of writing Kenyan national literature in the Swahili language against Ngugi rather than in Kikuyu or Kikamba or Lou or Masai does not resolve the complications present on the issue of language in Africa . Wole Soyinka in response to the challenge posed by the concrete example of Ngugi wa Thiong'o has advocated the position that Swahili should be adopted as a continental language. Perhaps Soyinka had more in mind the adoption of this language for communication purposes rather than as a mode in which to render creative experience, i.e., the writing of literature. Ngugi could argue that the writing of literature involves not only the choice of a language in which to write, but also the technique in which to unravel the creative imagination. The gestation of a technique in a literary culture requires a much longer time. Hence for Ngugi it would be easier to write African literature in our mother tongues rather than in an adopted language, that is, beyond imperial domination. In this instance also, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has much validity.

I would not like to end this presentation on a note of inconclusiveness, in that I would affirm that yes we should definitely write African literature in the various African languages. But the real and fundamental question is in which languages! What is the historical and cultural logic of that choice. For instance, looking at Nigeria, should the Nigerian national literature be written in all the major languages of that country, in Ibo, in Yoruba, in Hausa and other languages, or should a position be taken that it would be better if that country's national literature were written in Hausa, which at one time was a lingua franca in extensive areas of West Africa! But can such a choice be made without Nigeria collapsing into violent dissension and perhaps even civil war. These are some of the hard problems facing us in Africa when a position is taken that African literature should and must be written in the African languages. One thing is certain, a deeper knowledge of the cultural history of the formation of African languages is still needed. One other thing also, we need to have a deeper understanding of European cultural history, particularly at a time when there began European national literatures approximately at the time when there began European national literatures approximately at the time of the Renaissance when these emerging literatures dislodged Latin language hegemony which had stifled and hindered their development. In this regard, the writing of the history of Italian national literature by Francesco de Sanctis in the nineteenth-century and the writing of the same literary history in the twentieth-century by Alberto Asa Rosa, is exemplary for us Africans. We still await, from an African perspective, the writing of a national literary history of a particular African country. Such an undertaking is much more complex and difficult in Africa than in Europe because of the multiplicity of languages in existence in practically all the national territories in Africa . Nevertheless, it is not an insurmountable challenge. Thank you.