

The Role and Place of Ethnic Languages(1) in Conflict Resolution: The Case Of African Countries

By P.K Nzunga

Abstract

The current state of most African countries cannot be dissociated from the Berlin Treaty of 1885, which divided the continent into *zones of European influence*. Before this year, most communities in this continent ran their own affairs in relative independence, within a clearly understood ethnic region.

The most significant characteristics of an ethnic community were it's language and culture. Although the new foreign masters did not always clearly perceive or appreciate these social elements, the diversity and the wealth of these entities was enormous in the African continent. The greatest injustice the colonial masters committed was, undoubtedly, the imposition of their language and culture on the colonized minority groups. This article discusses the consequences of this phenomenon in post-colonial Africa and evaluates the alternative possibilities in relation to conflict resolution in Africa.

Dr. Nzunga is a lecturer in Linguistics at Kenyatta University, Department of Foreign Languages

Role et Place des Langues Ethniques dans la Résolution des Conflits: Le Cas des Pays Africains

Par M. P. K. Nzunga

Résumé:

Il est pratiquement impossible de faire une dissociation nette entre les problèmes qui accablent les pays africains et le Traité de Berlin (1885), qui divisa l'Afrique en zones d'influence européenne. Auparavant, chaque communauté ethnique menait indépendamment ses activités, au sein d'une région ethnique bien délimitée. Les traits saillants d'une communauté furent sa langue et la culture correspondante. Les nouveaux administrateurs ne distinguaient pas toujours ces éléments sociaux - et les appréciaient encore moins. Or ceux-ci constituaient une richesse incontestable de la patrimoine locale. L'injustice la plus grave qu'ont commise les colonisateurs, fut l'imposition de leurs langue et culture aux groupes ethniques colonisés. L'article de Nzunga s'efforce de tracer les conséquences catastrophiques de cette domination depuis 1885 à nos jours. L'auteur suggère des stratégies palliatives, dans le but de prévenir et de résoudre certains conflits, en Afrique contemporaines.

Dr. M. P. K. Nzunga est Maître de Conférences (Sciences du Langage), Département des Langues Etrangères, Université Kenyatta, Kenya.

Cultural and Linguistic Conflicts

Experts (ethnologists, sociologists, psychologists, psycho-linguists, socio-linguists etc.) say that linguistic and cultural domination, over a long time, leads to disintegration of social institutions of minority groups. The elements of the latter align themselves to the values of the dominating culture (which remains essentially unaffected). The general tendency in the urban centres of African countries is to copy (wholesale) whatever is happening in western countries. This is usually done without taking time to wonder whether the *imported thing* is beneficial and/or compatible with the national developmental needs.

Experts tell us that this has lead to political, economic, cultural and linguistic dependence which, in turn, has eroded the African cultural and linguistic identity. In some cases there has been loss of this crucial element, which sociologists and psychiatrists claim to be an essential psychic and social balance.

It has in fact been established that "when a person (or a community) loses cultural/linguistic identity, and before acquiring the identity of the dominating culture/language, there is a period characterized by mental and social crisis (2).

The socio-political, socio-economic, cultural, educational, socio-linguistic, etc., problems that are tearing through ex-colonies of western countries, would therefore seem to have at least one common denominator - colonial domination. To solve them, some native scholars suggest that African languages should be taught in schools. Some militants even recommend that European languages should be replaced with African languages in all institutions at all levels.

What these militants do not seem to know is that it is not enough for a country to discourage the use European languages to solve its socio-economic and socio-linguistic problems. The experience of Tanzania and Ethiopia has shown that even an African language (Kiswahili and Amharic, respectively), can

dominate the other local idioms and threaten ethnic/linguistic identity. The Kenyan census of 1969 provided very disturbing data in this respect. In this country, the smallest ethnic communities (Rendille, Elmolo, Omotik, Burji, Ajurani) are surrounded by a larger ethnic group. The elderly members of these minority groups (over 50 years) are still very attached to the linguistic and cultural values of their community. The younger members of the communities (under 50 years) are not. In fact they use the language of the larger community around theirs at all times and strive to acquire the cultural values of the dominating ethnic group. Even when their elders speak to them in mother tongue, they answer back in the language of the larger group. One doesn't have to be an anthropologist or a socio-linguist to see that in a generation or two to come, these minority languages/cultures, will cease to exist. There must be hundreds of minority groups in similar predicament across the African continent.

Apparently, existence of two (or more) cultures/languages, in which none dominates the other, is possible. According to experts, it is characterized by constant mutual exchanges at all levels. The conditions leading to such a situation would only be guaranteed by the establishment of a well balanced and appropriate *ecolinguistic system*. That is probably what the African countries should strive to do, by determining the role of each language in the country, as regards integral national development.

Socio-economic Benefits of Teaching in Ethnic Languages in Primary Schools

In most African countries, official languages (often equal to languages of ex-colonial masters) are used by a very small percentage of the total population. In fact, the use of the official languages is restricted to the elite circles in the urban centres, and decreases considerably as one moves towards the country-

side. Inversely, the ethnic languages are still the privileged intra-ethnic mode of communication in rural areas.

The use of these languages in primary schools situated in such areas would greatly improve communication between the teacher and the pupils. This would facilitate and encourage adaptation of learners, making it easier to absorb subject content, reducing cases of failure and repetition. A pilot project in Ghana (in the mid 80s) showed that by so doing, the primary school cycle could even be reduced to six years. This would help the African countries to save billions of dollars, which could be channelled towards other socio-economic development projects.

It has been established (as we saw above) that loss of ethnic cultural/linguistic identity leads to a period of social crisis. This condition could go as far as affecting cognitive development. Use of ethnic languages during the initial three years as media of instruction would spare the pupils this unnecessary punishment. Since the situation in urban centres is extremely heterogeneous, the national language can be used.

In the long run, teaching in ethnic languages during the first three years would:

- Reduce the advantages the children of the elite have over those of the general mass, conferred to them by their mastery of the official language, which they are privileged to use at home, even before school age.
- Enable the parents to contribute directly to the cognitive development of their children.
- Reduce the alienation of the ethnic values, created and perpetuated by the exclusive use of foreign languages, at all levels of the educational systems in Africa.

The Use of National Languages in Integral Development as Means of Conflict Resolution

Experience in Tanzania and in Ethiopia has shown that local African languages can assume the role of national, and even of official languages. However, foreign languages should still be learned, and used according to the developmental needs of the country in question.

In fact UNESCO supports the use of national languages as media of instruction from fourth year to the end of primary education. Pilot projects have shown that at this level, national languages can effectively transmit subject content. After the third year, local ethnic languages can be taught as compulsory subjects, upto the end of primary cycle.

In secondary schools and in universities, national languages should be used to teach arts subjects. European languages (English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, etc.) would probably be better suited to teach science subjects, at these levels.

Very high rates of population growth over-burden social amenities and interfere with economic development plans, in most African countries. Although efforts have been made to curb this draw-back, the methods used are cumbersome, ineffective and unnecessarily expensive. Foreign languages and models (accessible only to a very small portion of the national population) are used. Attempts are made to spread information through newspapers and TV. which, like foreign languages, are only accessible to members of the elite, and to certain urbanites. Worse still, solutions suggested don't take into account the life-style of the targeted ethnic populations. In most cases, the very key element on which the success depends is a foreign idea to the vast majority of Africans.

Family planning, Adult Education, AIDS awareness and Family Health Care campaigns should be done in ethnic languages in the countryside. Foreign and national languages can

be used in sub-urban and urban centres, as may be dictated by the needs. The radio is more widely accessible to urban, sub-urban and rural dwellers. As such, radio programs should be formulated in ethnic languages, in support of the above stated campaigns.

Better still, the people involved (in social projects and development plans) should go to the countryside, and win the cooperation of the farmer/pastoralist in her/his own mother tongue.

The Role of Foreign Languages in Integral Development

In modern times, where they are talking of Global Village and Information Superhighway, it would be detrimental to easily dismiss foreign languages, for they are used in international communication. This is particularly true of the very touristic countries in Africa (Egypt, Kenya, Zimbabwe, South Africa etc.). Languages such as English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, etc., should still be taught according to the social and development needs of each African country. These languages are also closely associated with scientific and technological advancement.

Sociolinguists tell us that it is not European languages *per se* which prevent the development of African languages to international status and fuel inter-class and ethnic conflicts. In fact the same argument used against the ethnic and national languages was used against European languages, when they were dominated by the ancient Greek. They were said to be unable to express modernity effectively. They had to get out of the Greek umbrella of domination, to develop to what they are to-day. Sociolinguists maintain that such development is only possible under the appropriate political, economic, cultural and ecolinguistic conditions. That is probably what the African continent should strive to achieve (as one of the basic steps

towards conflict resolution through communication). Meanwhile, foreign languages should remain media of instruction for science subjects, in tertiary institutions and in universities.

Notes

1. For one to understand this article, it is necessary to clarify the semantic values of certain linguistic terms used:
 - Official language: This refers to the language given the most prestigious status, by the law of the country. It is the one used in official institutions (parliament, army, schools, offices, hospitals...). In Africa, it is more often than not the language of the ex-colonial master.
 - National language: This term refers to the idiom that takes the second place (in the eye of the law). In Africa it is often the most widely spoken language; since it is also the inter-ethnic *lingua-franca*. Sometimes it is one of the local languages which is promoted to this status. It can also be a regional language, as can be seen with Kiswahili in East Africa.
 - Cases where the official language is also the national language are possible (eg: Kiswahili in Tanzania, Amharic in Ethiopia). During the colonial era, the language of the master was both official and national.
 - Ethnic languages: In the eye of the law, all the other languages are considered equal, regardless of the number of native speakers. They are referred to as ethnic languages.
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